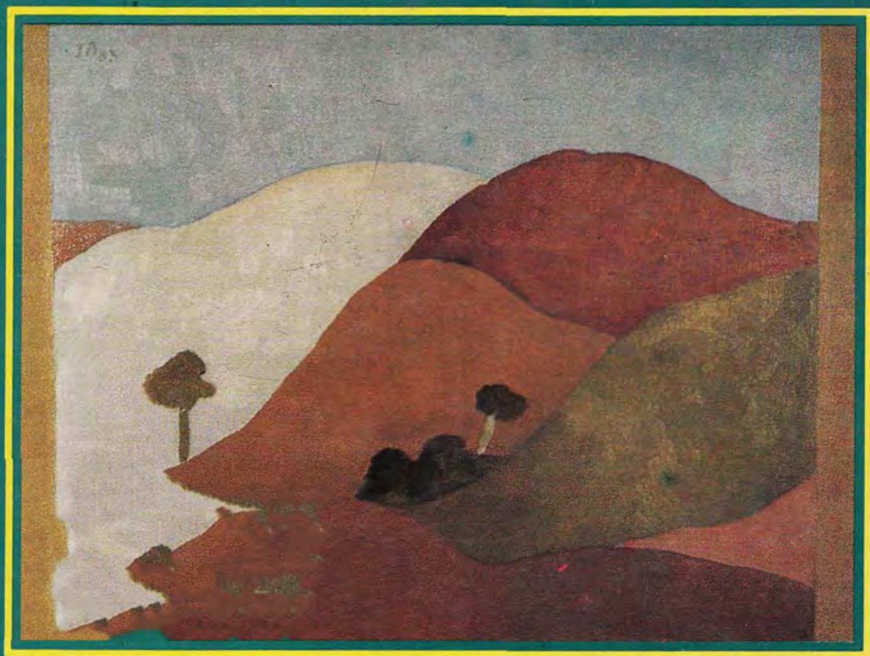
THE BED OF ARROWS
and other stories



GOPINATH MOHANTY

The Bed of Arrows and Other Stories is a superb collection of thirteen short stories of Gopinath Mohanty. Selected and translated by Sitakant Mahapatra, himself a major Indian poet, the stories reflect Mohanty's great love for the tribals, his deep sensitivity to their struggle for existence, the pride and predicament of the rustic women and the impact of the new waves of political transformation sweeping rural India.

Mohanty's language has all along been the spoken language. Using the special idiom of the common folk, the stories capture the human moods and movements, sometimes unpredictable, sometimes poetic, but they bring out the grim reality of the battle-scarred middle class with unusual refinement.

It is not easy to capture the charm of the original language in translation. But the poet-translator has brought out this charm and strength in ample measure.

Gopinath Mohanty was born in 1914. He passed his M.A. in English from the Patna University in 1936 and joined the Orissa Administrative Service in 1938. One of the makers of modern India fiction, his first novel was published in 1940. *Paraja* and *Amrutara Santan*, two of the finest Indian novels since Independence, are structured on India's little-known tribal world. The former received rave reviews when it was published by Faber and Faber in 1987 after OUP had published it in India, forty-two years after the publication of the original in Oriya. *Amrutara Santan* was the first Indian novel to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1955. He has received several honours and awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Bharatiya Jnanpith.

The Government of India honoured him with the Padmabhushan in 1986. He was a visiting Professor in San Jose University, USA.

Contd. on Second Flap

The Bed of Arrows and Other Stories

GOPINATH MOHANTY

Translated from the Oriya by
SITAKANT MAHAPATRA

Introduction by
MANOJ DAS



SAHITYA AKADEMI

SAHITYA AKADEMI

Head Office :

Rabindra Bhavan, 35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi 110 001

Sales : 'Swati', Mandir Marg, New Delhi 110 001

Regional Offices :

Jeevan Tara Building, 4th Floor, 23A/44x, Diamond Harbour Road, Taratala, Calcutta 700 053

ADA Rangamandira, 109, J.C. Road, Bangalore 560 002

172, Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya Marg, Dadar, Bombay 400 014

Guna Building, 2nd Floor, 304-305, Annasalai, Teynampet, Madras 600 018

First Published 1995
Reprinted 1997

Price : Rs. 75

ISBN 81-7201-880-0

Published by Sahitya Akademi and printed at
Sonee Offset, Delhi - 110 032

Contents

Introduction

Over the hills and sylvan brooks of the tribal belt of Koraput in Orissa, the moon still appears mysterious and the night rather eerie, its silence interrupted by sounds earthly and unearthly, emanating from the impassable interiors not far from the tribal hamlets. Despite the fast thinning wood, one can still hear the drum and the flute and the songs with words and ideas as transparent, as clear and as humble as drops of dew:

> Upon the hill beyond our hill, dear,
> Sweet winds blow,
> Upon the hill beyond our hill, dear,
> blow your flute slow,
> For the flowers are blooming there,
> the birds are singing.

No doubt, today the dancing feet of the flower-clad damsels occasionally come to a halt, bewildered by a transistor-radio suddenly blaring out an alien note.

In the forties and fifties of the twentieth century, this region was rarely visited by outsiders other than moneylenders, landlords and petty officials, most of them pastmasters in the Satanic science of exploiting the naive.

Deputy Magistrate Gopinath Mohanty too arrived there as an 'outsider', but he did what none of his rank had ever done. He moved and camped amidst the tribals for days at a stretch, so much so that my maternal uncle, the late K.K. Samal who was then the District Magistrate and Collector stationed at Koraput town, would send search parties for this uncommon lieutenant of his. In fact, the town

itself was hardly different—particularly after nightfall—from the rest of the large district (lately divided into three districts). Gopinath Mohanty recounted to me how once his sudden arrival by jeep in front of my uncle's bungalow at midnight obliged a tiger couple to leave the gate, albeit reluctantly.

Gopinath Mohanty sang with the tribals, ate with them and shared their sorrows and joys in numerous ways. 'They would sit as close to you as possible,' he reminisced before me, 'would feel happy to light their *pikas* from your cheroot and their goats would poke their mouths into your pocket.' Once it was raining when he reached a certain tribal hamlet. The villagers were anxious to find a palm-leaf umbrella for him. 'Why do you worry?' Gopinath told them. 'Don't you see that water cannot touch my person?' he asked, drawing their attention to his water-proof overcoat. They were amazed when they observed that water indeed slipped off his magic cloth. Women from the entire hamlet came rushing—and they were joined by a few from the neighbouring hamlets—and each of them splashed a cup of water on him and giggled and laughed at the spectacle. It was a mini festival.

Gopinath Mohanty, while giving the tribals justice as a magistrate, educating them about their rights as their guardian, was also preparing for expanding the horizons of Oriya literature, exploring areas till then uncharted and characters till then unknown. The results were the two sagas: *Amritara Santana* and *Paraja*. Reading the former (for which he received the Sahitya Akademi Award—the first Oriya writer to be so honoured), one courses through the tribal world with its strange rituals, one hears the roars of tigers, the murmur of the brooks and the laughter of the innocent and at an unguarded moment, one might feel provoked to shout one's warning to a child of this unsuspecting world against falling a prey to the brutal moneylender.

But in this genre of his fiction, his supreme achievement is *Paraja*, a story with convincing drama, ending with a long-tormented father and his sons suddenly chopping off the head of their tormentor, the moneylender, and calmly reporting themselves at the police station.

But Gopinath's ken was not limited to the laughter and tears of the tribals. In *Mati Matala* (for which he received the Janapith

Award), the hero is a young idealist and the heroine too becomes one. Their idealism is bred in a Gandhian climate, but they transcend its scope and reaches a point where both philosophy and the hard realities of life are hitched to a dynamic force, an inner freedom, almost spiritual. Within this frame the life of rural Orissa is vividly portrayed. Inspired visionaries are tried by collective pettiness. Comes a devastating flood. It washes away many things. The vastness of the calamity provides one with the occasion for some lofty dreams and man's deathless aspirations. A greater dawn is indicated.

Gopinath Mohanty was as great a novelist as he was a short story writer. But while his novels were marked by powerful plots, his short stories were remarkable for his typical handling of the Oriya language, his uncanny capacity for casting phrases chaste with those colloquial, thereby achieving a new harmony. Its effect in the native Oriya language is superb—something that cannot survive the process of translation. Even so the thirteen stories chosen by the worthy translator—himself a renowned scholar and poet—give us as close a taste of the original as possible. Translating Gopinath is an arduous task; often his practice of leaving a sentence incomplete, when followed in English, appears rather awkward. But developing them into formal sentences might prove detrimental to the spirit of the situation.

While a story like *Tadpa* represents Gopinath's great love, the tribal, the one like *Ants* shows the alchemy the tribal's terrible struggle for existence and his innocence can work out on a mind poised to strike him.

Then there is that relatively long story *Identity*, showing, through the pride and predicament of a rustic woman, the impact of the new waves of politics rolling over the rural India.

The rest of the stories in the collection capture human moods and moments, sometimes unpredictable (as in *Two Heroes*), sometimes poetic (as in *The Bird*), but mostly they present the grim realities of the battle-scarred middle-class life, through situations sometimes jocular and sometimes grim—or—often simultaneously funny and grim.

To focus briefly on the factual aspect of Gopinath Mohanty's life and works: he was born in 1914, passed his M.A. in English from

the Patna University in 1936 and joined the Administrative Service of his state in 1938. His first novel was published in 1940. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1955 and the Janapith Award in 1974. While Sambalpur University conferred on him D.Litt. (honorific) in 1975, the Government of India decorated him with *Padmabhusan* in 1981. In 1986 he was a visiting Professor to the San Jose University, USA.

His books include 24 novels, ten collections of short stories, three biographical works, two collections of essays, one book of poetry, five works on the tribal culture, a couple of plays and his autobiography.

He died on 20 August 1991, in California, at the residence of his daughter.

MANOJ DAS

The Bed of Arrows

BACK from work, today he emitted a sweet fragrance. Turning on her side, her face contorted with pain, Kamala looked at his face from her bed.

She remembered her decision not to speak any more of her pain, nor to reveal the agony on her face; instead she would smile, or at least try hard to smile. Yet why does she feel a dampness within? Why does she find some happiness in the thought that her days were numbered? And that she should not prove herself a worthless burden on him?

Before she could sport a smile Surababu, his face dry, had come nearer her. Pressing her head with his left hand and playing with her dishevelled hair he asked. 'Do you feel any increase in your pain today? Oh God, what should I do, how long to carry on this way?'

Kamala smiled. 'What's new in my pain? It is the same old thing,' she said.

His face seemed to dry up further before her sharp gaze.

'Why won't you say so! That is in your nature, I mean nature of the women folk. Never to say what is going on inside even to yourself, let alone to another. You think that if you burn yourself out at the service of the others in a single-minded devotion, the heavens will be yours first, isn't that so, Kama?'

Surababu extended his hand to caress her cheeks. But as if in a desperate bid to escape his touch she withdrew her face writhing in pain. She felt a stab of pain in the chest and a sudden dizziness as she closed her eyes and floated in an emptiness. Half a minute later, she was herself again, and bit her lower lip, 'You have not even changed your clothes, you must be feeling wretched. Will you please

go and eat something?' she said and then called out to their cook-cum-servant, Indira, in a nasal voice.

'I am going,' said Surababu. 'You won't have to shout. That will only aggravate your weakness and pain. How much do you think is left of your body?' She sighed and closed her eyes. But Surababu was still there when, a minute later, as she opened her eyes.

'How much is left of your body?' These words echoed in her ears. The fragrance returned to her nose. Her vision was getting blurred. Things grew alternately clear and hazy.

Now she could see a human body sparkling in the pale wintry light after the rains. That is her husband. His forty-sixth birthday was approaching, yet the structure continued to be strong; rather it had grown stronger. The wide forehead, the glow of knowledge in the face, the chin adamantine to fight and overcome obstacles—remain unchanged. And that body was her property, only hers!

Kamala had gooseflesh, her face grew hot, there was burning around her eyes and hungrily she started at Surababu. She remembered his words of sympathy. His was a lovely body, but what had she been reduced to! The tiny cloud of suspicion that floated on her consciousness suddenly became huge and there was intimation of rain. She pressed her teeth hard as she muttered. 'What use for an empty wine-cup?'

Surababu, startled, asked, 'What did you say?' Kamala smiled with jealousy, but said, 'Nothing much. But, see, it's a long time I have been telling you that I am bedridden, can do precious little for you and you need care. For my sake, you must. . . .'

To her surprise, she noticed that Surababu did not turn his face away, he did not blink repeatedly and there was no sign of sadness as before. Instead, there was anger in his voice, as he said, 'What nonsense do you speak!'

Kamala felt sinking, not because of his anger but out of an unknown fear. 'Are you angry?' she said, 'You have just returned after a hard day's work, why don't you go, change, have a wash and eat something? Why do you keep standing here?'

And once again she squeaked. 'Indira, can't you hear me? Babu is standing here!'

Surababu walked away. The breeze retained that fragrance only for a while. Kamala kept thinking, vacantly looking up, in her bed. Outside the shadows lengthened. She could see the drum-stick plant. Its leaves flashed a smile in the sun a little while ago, and now it was slowly becoming a column of darkness.

She went back in her memory by twenty-two long years. Ghana was yet to be born. Manika and Suna were not there even in her realm of dream. It was the first year after their marriage.

'You exude such a fragrance, Kama!'

'Please move. Mother is in the other room and, look, someone, may be one of your students, is knocking at the door. You came back after a hard day's teaching. Are you not hungry?' All around there was fragrance. Covering his own face with her dishevelled hair he lay silent and still.

'Would you please go away?'

'Quiet! I can hear a song!'

'What nonsense!'.

'There is music in the human breast, fragrance in the body and do you know what is there in the touch?'

'Fire?' 'No you are wrong. The touch has the caress of the lotus and sleep!'

'Yes, everything is there in your language. You are, after all, a professor of literature.'

'Let us not talk of literature. Literature is not greater than life, it is no substitute for life. It is an act that leans on life. Wait, let me drink life.'

'Are you not ashamed?'

'Shame is only a superficial mask. Why to have something in which you don't believe?'

Startled, Kamala tried to get up, but there was an explosion of all the familiar pain and weakness in her body. Piteously she kept lying and sulked and could recognise that the fragrance was nothing special, but of an *attar*, available in the bazaar. From one who has applied it, the fragrance jumps on to another. It was a long time she had forgotten all about toiletry. Forgetting all personal pleasures, all her tender habits she had made herself a tough housewife, rearing

children. Now they had emerged into the wide world. Manika and Suna had set up their own homes. Ghana was a student of forestry at Coimbatore. Once he took up a job, he should get married even though he was a child, so that there would be a daughter-in-law in the house.

She had sacrificed all her desires and pleasures, deriving satisfaction only in giving, in sacrificing and bringing up the children. The soft palms had grown rough in domestic chores; her colours had faded and there was in increasing loss of hair. Feeding herself was only a ritual after feeding all. For her clothes she managed with whatever was available; a little coconut oil was enough for her body. Her only wealth was her right to work. And now, for a year and half, she had lost even that right and lay bed-ridden. Doctor after doctor had examined her; so many medicines had her body absorbed, but to no avail. The same soreness in the waist and the legs, the weakness was on the increase. She knew that her body was slowly wasting away.

She and *attar*! But that fragrance had returned through his body perhaps only to tease her. He was unusual that way; never cared for perfumes; often even forgot to shave, comb his hair or dress properly. Great in knowledge, a professor, everything looked nice on him, but surely not *attar*.

Who then passed it on to him?

How good was her husband and indeed, and how beautiful God had been to her!

Darkness was deepening. Kamala wept, only a few wet drops of tear in the hot eyes.

Indira brought in a lamp. Kamala enquired and was told that Surababu had gone out.

'Where did he go?' she asked.

'He did not tell me.'

She fell silent.

The *attar* was available in the market and there was nothing exclusive about it.

The world was full of human beings too and if you seek, you get. No one waits. And all the concerns, all shows of love, were only for a while, something of a lie.

Turning back in the bed Kamala lay quiet; there were more tears. Indira stood beside her. He was used to her tears, but he felt sad every time he saw them.

'What items should I make for dinner?' he asked.

'How long do you expect me to be here that you should keep on asking me?'

Her voice sounded slurred.

The effeminate Indira asked as he kept chewing the tip of his dhoti, 'You are crying, sister? Why, won't you get well soon?'

'Let this body go into the hearth-fire. What use was this kind of living if suffering is all? Who cares for whom?'

Indira as gone. She wiped her face. She had frankly declared her wish to die at least before one and now felt somewhat light.

She lay cooly thinking of death which was surely better than doing nothing except blinking.

But when would it come? She could not recollect any instance of forgiveness from anyone but there were numerous instances of murmur at not getting service expected of her.

Ghana was desperately attached to her but first and foremost, his love was his studies, his future. Four months ago, even when she was critically ill, could he manage to stay for more than four days? His father also insisted that he should not spoil his studies. In fact that was the chorus from all the throats. And Manika and Suna belonged to other households. How often could they come? Each one, after all, had a world of her own to look after.

The one who was her own, had gone away for a walk, without uttering even a word for her.

The lights were on. Kamala looked outside as she lay quiet, her mouth half-open as if she had stopped in the midst of saying something and her mind had flown away elsewhere.

She thought that she was at the age when the body's desires should end. She had a son and two daughters, she had stepped into her husband's house at the age of fifteen and had passed twenty-two years managing the house. It was one long stretch of time during which some acquaintances had got broken homes, some others left for the other world. She thought of Ghana's birth twenty-one years ago. The

hospital, the pain, a small operation, dressing, the unseasonal rain and the bitter cold wind that made one shiver to one's spine. The peace-loving professor would wake up with a start at her cry and say, 'Can't you sleep quietly? The child has now woken up too!' The baby also cried bitterly.

Life leans on happiness. It cannot continue with a sense of fear submerging it. Sometimes she had let herself go and in sheer self-defence ignored the precepts of the scriptures. The body remained a body, suffered injury, recovered and only awaited other injuries.

After Ghana came Manika and then Suna. They were the fruits of happiness, if not of ecstasy.

Even then she persuaded herself; the body's desires must end. So often she would tell her weakling friend Sovana: 'My friend, the life seems to be only a stretch of suffering and agony. Where is happiness? It was so wonderful—these days in our father's home! All those swimming, plucking flowers, climbing trees, racing to nowhere. Can one ever get back those carefree days?'

Often she remembered the living shadow of the strong and healthy limbs and heard the seductive whispers of the past.

Sighs and the waves of philosophy as she realised in practical life often surged up to the surface.

Her friend understood. After the birth of her second child she was bloodless, suffering from indigestion and frequent loose motion. Soon it was only a frame of bones. Her husband was a foreman in a steel plant and he looked strong as a Bhima.

She always agreed with Kamala. 'Alas, who knew about all the pains involved in building a home and raising children? How flitting is one's shine, one's strength!'

Kamala would nod and keep mum. She could never think of Surababu as greedy or cruel. She had the keys to their chests and he always brought to her whatever he earned. He had no fancy for anything. He could never be compared to her friend's husband.

She would negate her own words and console, 'It is all a matter of destiny, dear friend!' Kamala could guess her friend's condition from her crumpled clothes, unoiled hair and weak body. And she knew the *pan*-chewing bony figure was indeed a rebel, but it suppressed more than it spoke.

Her friend managed to live containing within her secret spirit of revolt, but once again she was in the family way. This time, however, she could not live to see the offspring's face. Her foreman husband had the baby boy in his arms as the mother lay on the bed like a dirty cast-out piece of linen.

Kamala had heard about this tragic finale from Surababu. With tears in his eyes, the sympathetic professor, a lover of literature, had given a graphic picture of the event. In his elegant words the event had come alive.

Kamala had felt the loss inside as a woman. Her consciousness that was looking for deliverance had, as it were, met her friend somewhere in the sky. He had a sudden vision of that bony face, a curve of a smile ridiculing life. Kamala used to pity that but today she herself was an object of pity. She felt as if it was her friend who had won, she herself had been bankrupt of her pity.

She felt like asking, 'All of us would depart, sooner or later. Why then suffer this life?' Her pain was returning with a vengeance as she remembered things and pieced them together. The evening when Surababu introduced to her a 'new person', Srimati Chandra Midha alias Usharani Devi from Siam. She was Professor in a Ceylonese women's academy. She had come under an exchange programme for teachers. She taught English but had acquired proficiency in Hindi, Bengali and Tamil. She spent two months at Puri earlier when she learnt to speak fluently in Oriya. She was guileless, almost child-like Surababu added, 'I am now proving to her that her ancestors were from this Kalinga and hence her knowledge of Oriya lay dormant in her.'

Chandra Midha kept smiling but there was a blowing motion in her body. She brought her arms together and then threw them apart like a gymnast.

'Swagatam!' said Surababu.

'Welcome!' she reciprocated and uttered a few phrases explaining the genesis of the word.

'Did you see how much she knows?' Surababu commented with great appreciation.

Chandra Midha winked and tried to compare the words for love in English, Hindi, Bengali and Oriya. Kamala laughed. Surababu

said nothing. 'Devi Chandra Midha! How many children do you have?' asked Kamala.

Surababu stared hard at Kamala. Chandra Midha laughed strangely, and its ripples spread all over her face and along the rows of her pearly teeth inside her coral lips.

She asked Surababu 'Wachat?' meaning what was that? Surababu played the host all alone. Kamala did not struggle to get up.

Kamala is like that—let him explain to her—she decided. From the drawing room their laughter floated in. Kamala understood Chandra Midha was really wonderful and her laughter was not only music but also the voice of music, a life free and fearless. It was something to be envied. Kamala enjoyed neither that health nor that freedom. From her narrow tradition-bound bylane she started at Chandra Midha's unhampered highway. For the first time she had felt a trepidation, a secret shiver of fear. No one explained it to her but her feminine instinct seems to have read the situation all right.

That evening she prayed, 'O God, deliver me from this life!'

Interpretation of an event depended on one's point of view and the point of view was moulded by one's mood which in turn depended on several other factors.

Sometimes she recalled the events he narrated to her and his analysis of them. She was not illiterate even though she hailed from a village. She had studied at the lower primary school, had read scriptures to please her mother, and had perused, for her own pleasure, novels that inspired one to look for a hero in life.

Looking anew at the past she felt that Surababu had never loved her; he loved only himself and had used her as a colour to enjoy the sight of his self love spread out.

At the beginning he had tried to educate her, but had failed and given up. He had taken her out only when obliged to do so, otherwise he sat lost behind his pile of books all the while.

The selfish meaning of his monologue came back anew to her: 'Only if someone was there to help me a bit, I could have gone much farther. Doing a D.Litt. would not have been that difficult!'

She remembered her cooking, her *pan*, her household worries, washing the kids—surely these were of little use for his D.Litt.

Well, now that a Chandra Midha had appeared in his life, let him work for a D.Litt. and have it.

How could she, a dwarf in knowledge, have done anything for him!

Often he gave his observations on womenfolk in our society: they were good housewives, but no good *Sahadharmini*—a partner in husband's pursuit of his duty.

'Do you understand, Kama,' he would say, '*Dharma* is not idol worship, it is one's activity according to one's ideal. If the husband is a doctor and the wive's *dharma* is the kitchen, do you think that makes for a good partnership?'

She also recalled his comments on life and society with literature as his yardstick to judge them.

'Look at the ethics. Clever ones have interpreted them to suit their own interest. They hide their lies, their false pretences behind their ethics. They don't have any faith in their hearts, but the name of Rama is always on their lips. Our womenfolks are never tired of vaunting their ethics, but live in the dark, narrow cubicles of the mind. Trying to be careful, they end up being selfish; sometimes the fool passes off as the catholic. And those who revel in sordid rumours and whose imaginations run amuck put on dazzling vermilion marks on their forehead and wear a brooch with 'husband is the greatest guru' inscribed on it. True ethics do not consist in merely reserving one's body for the husband letting the mind be a heap of filth.'

To all these she had nodded. He must, after all, be right. All that must be in the books he teaches. She never questioned the relevance of such doctrines in practice.

Bisibabu, a senior scholar, often used to come to consult his 'Sir'. Handsome, with his bushy eyebrows ranged above his eye-glasses, he was a lovable person, ever smiling bright and exuding a sort of familiarity. One always felt comfortable and happy in his presence. Sometimes when Bisi was closeted with Surababu she had brought in tea and snacks for them. But suddenly one day Surababu poured venom against him; 'Don't trust that guy, a veritable devil under a sweetmask. Don't forget.'

Since then she never even appeared before Bisi.

He had such complaints against many other people. Kamala now recollected, he had always something bad to whisper against so many of the familiar faces.

Kamala now read his nature in a new light. He had mastered her mind and had put shackles on her feet, but perhaps he never trusted her.

And these are known as ethics, affection, togetherness.

An empty co-existence, gilded by illusions. Life had taken a backward stride and she would never regain her adolescent days.

Sometimes she felt like blurting out: 'Sure enough, your globe-trotting Chandra Midha has seen so much known so much that her mind cannot but be broad, unlike ours. And, she has no husband, no son, she does not depend on someone else for a living. Why should she fear anyone?'

But she held back the surging words. Always she recalled his anxiety-ridden face, his sleepless nights. Was it not only for her? The memory of the spring of yester years always put her with her husband on a swing where there was no envy, no meanness, but only bathing in the blessings of flower-petals.

'Let him be happy, let everyone be happy, let my life's lamp burn out before him, but let him continue in happiness.'

It was as if the body was dying away slowly from the feet upward. Like an empty vessel the mind resonated even with a slight touch. She felt that the body and the mind were not only mutually dependent but both were prisoners in the grip of Time.

She had danced uncontrollably, not the dance of youth but of a half-dead leaf trembling precariously on a branch in the cold northern wind. A dance bereft of hope or any priming of forgiveness.

How could she forgive another when she wanted to die, not prepared to forgive even herself?

How healthy he is even now! Like a rock shedding the last drop of the lashing rain with ease, he had stood unaffected by ordeals. Time had rolled by; they had grown older and poorer, but he too had marched forward and had enviably kept his head high. Their three children had been well-placed in life. Even now he would get up in the morning, do his exercises and go for a constitutional.

The earth in the morning would lay open before him and the sky would be a page of poetry.

He continued to combine his studies with the practice of sitar late into the night.

And her world? One of suffering and pain, a scorched mind, a little bed and all the movement confined to crawling to the toilet and back. There was a hedge of small and big trees, beyond the window and in some distance the back of a house. Leaning on them was the curve of the sky. The water-towers, the chimneys of a sugar mill, the tall trees and buildings of different heights cut the sky in a haphazard manner.

The lonely, empty sky. Would she go there? When? But inside the body the last drop of vitality still insists on living, to see the changing seasons, the familiar crows, house-sparrows, the kites; their movements and changing moods. And when the sky looked deep blue and the drum-stick tree bent down with flowers, she tended to forget her disease. She called out to Indira, 'How beautiful are these drum-stick leaves and flowers! Why don't you cook them for Babu? He loves them, you know!'

The sound of human voice outside brought her happiness. When it was loneliness all around she felt the coolness of a dew-fall inside her chest.

Tears trickled down her eyes.

Like a lunatic or a weakling suddenly inspired to strength when under anger or envy, she gathered strength from her sense of being ignored and lost. With effort she brought her endless coughing to a close. And she knew that it was foolishness to expect the healthy ones looking after the invalid all the time. That would be a deception, an illusion.

That is why she would tell him now and then, 'I have become a burden to you. Please marry again.' And the reply always was, 'Please keep quiet. Are you mad? Won't people laugh at this?'

She was, indeed, losing her sanity since the coming of this Usharani. Surababu insisted on calling her by this name instead of her original name. Her name, in different contexts, came up everyday. He sang her praise in various tunes.

And lying in her bed Kamala would realise that a healthy man looked only at a rising sun.

She often repeated that the desires of the flesh are a mistake, a delusion.

Her attendant Indira alone listened to her. 'This is the way of the world, Indira, never trust a man!' Indira hardly understood the significance of that statement, but he had an instinctive wrath against the male sex. How much he wished that he were born a woman!

'He would say, you will recover sister!'

The two decrepit boats touched each other through inadequate words and then floated apart. Kamala derived some peace from her loneliness.

But she noticed the changing mood of her husband and marked how he looked brighter day by day. His face and his eyes betrayed rejuvenation. Sometimes he kept quiet as if under a spell; sometimes he gave causeless starts.

His sitar played a new music. He returned late from the college and then went for a walk after dark.

In the beginning he used to inform her, 'I have to be with Chandra Midha for a while to discuss a paper in comparative linguistics.' Then he began avoiding her name. But he spent more and more time outside the home.

Nobody had told her anything, but Kamala understood that life will triumph over death, the healthy and the beautiful will dislodge the dead.

Surababu exuded that fragrance once again; he was out on stroll once again.

What was that streak of fire on the horizon? The round large moon rose, beaming. Even the drum-stick tree looked like a beauty in its haze.

She too once hoped, and desired to be like that.

Suddenly, she felt, gigantic waves of a tide rolled over her entire consciousness.

She had found something. She had something to say.

But she was unable to articulate it in words. In any case there was no use for it.

Yet her mouth remained half open.

Surababu returned at half past nine. He too was thinking of life all the way. He felt certain that life and happiness were inseparable. So too were death, misery and narrowness.

Kamala lay, face upward and bent towards the moon. The mouth was slightly open; she had not been able to say what she wanted to say.

Ants

SLOWLY—very slowly—they moved up, the two tired feet, one after the other. Only six yards more to reach the peak. The muscles of the leg tore apart, something hammered inside the chest furiously. Drops of sweat hung from the rim of the hat as rain-drops from the eaves. The shorts and the shirt were dripping wet and yet the body moved, as if leaning on the wind! At last he stood atop the hill. Ramesh paused.

Far below, the forest of tall trees looked dense and dark. The forest seemed to climb down the stairs of the valley to the nether region! But up there, the floor of the hill was bold, grass-rimmed, with the blue sky all around.

Climbing hills was no joke, Ramesh confessed to himself. But how could a young officer say that to the older people accompanying him? So he stomached his pain and with teeth pressed against the lower lip, took them to task, saying, 'What! Already tired, eh?' And then his lean wiry figure scuttled across the pointed, rough stones.

Binu, his peon, came up, sighing like an engine; his huge turban slowly rising like an earth-coloured mushroom. Dark and stockily built, gold rings in nose and ears, a flask and a gun slung round the neck: that was Binu. He stood behind Ramesh as a signboard.

Waves of a choral song's refrain surged up from below: *baile, baile.*

One, then a second, then another. Eight figures slowly emerged from behind the tall grass. Kondhs in loin clothes, with baskets at two ends of poles balanced on their shoulders. The song ended. Binu shouted, 'Lazy bones, however much you chide them they will always trail behind.'

'We have become old, sir!' somebody retorted; and then they

broke into peals of laughter and sat a little apart lighting their home-made cigars.

Binu served tea from the flask. Ramesh asked while sipping tea under an *amla* tree, 'Did you come this way before, Binu?'

'Yes, Sir, last time two years ago; many times before that.'

Did any other officer walk up this way?'

'So many, Sir. This is after all the shortcut to the market.'

Ramesh felt somewhat depressed. Right from his childhood his greatest passion and pleasure lay in feeling superior to others, in being ahead of all. That was surely the way to establish oneself in life! That insignificant, rustic poor boy from a village in North Balasore gradually growing up to his present stature—from the school to the college, friends losing out in life's cruel race, falling behind and seen no more; scholarships, medals, prizes, memories of success. Then the job, strangers coming to cultivate acquaintance, the peon's salute, the supplication of the Insurance Agent and the inevitable marital proposals. The world cared for him, saluted him. Those early successes in life's struggles gradually matured into self-confidence. He knew that he was somebody. Those innumerable others around him had no significance except for serving as his backdrop.

But that uneasy persistent feeling at every step! People had been before him, there were foot-prints ahead on the road and in comparison to the forerunners he was so small! At least while climbing the hill he flattered himself, imagining himself to be the first man from civilization walking up that way!

'Once the Burra Sahib camped here for five days, transforming the solitude into a bazaar! Oh that hunting spree, the merrymaking!' reminisced Binu.

Men had come and gone, but the forest remained as dark as ever.

'Where are the dense forests of those days with wild animals in plenty?' Binu resumed, 'The Kondhs have cleaned up everything. Here itself were Kondh villages; when the forest vanished the tigers rampaged in the villages and the villagers had to move away.'

'What do you mean by there are no forests? What are these?'

'Yes, the chopped-off trees have grown again, bur can they ever be the same?'

Ramesh thought of the endless stream of men roaming the forest;

penetrating, retreating and advancing again. The thin stream of their happiness and pain has not died even in these rocky forests and continues to flow like the murmuring rivulet rushing down the bed of pebbles.

Beset with melancholy, his awareness of a separate self merged into that eternal stream.

A thin line of ants had already formed around the broken bits of biscuits. Ramesh was amazed. Smiling, he told himself: 'Here too the ants!' Man's household companions were present with him even at this altitude of four thousand feet! They reminded him of the hidden purpose behind his visit to the hills.

'Do you think we can catch the rice-smugglers?' he asked Binu. 'Most certainly, Sir. Whichever route it may take the smuggled rice has to surface in Kaspawalsa market.' He assured him that it was only 10 a.m. now and climbed down that valley they will be able to reach the market before 2 p.m. 'And then, where can the smugglers escape? They shall all be caught.' 'Fine, let us then proceed without any further delay,' said Ramesh.

Binu was vexed at the prospect of a little rest vanishing even here. But he shouted at the Kondhs, ordering them to move. The Kondhs also muttered their dissatisfaction. No rest, only run and run faster! In their strange primitive language they showered abuses on Binu and his forefathers: These fellows knew only how to order: bring water, fetch fuel-wood, carry luggages. And they knew nothing more than a few words of command. No harm abusing them soundly! And the Kondhs wondered what fools these fellows were to try to catch people for selling rice across a border! Hunger was the same for everybody and whoever needed rice had a right to buy it wherever he could. How could that be a crime? And who after all produced rice? No doubt, these fellows had a strange sense of justice. For them it was a crime to distil liquor, to cut the trees, to buy rice or even to sit down when tired after a long day's trek carrying heavy luggages!

But there was no time to talk much. The peon had started abusing them, the officer had gone far ahead of them. All their complaints found vent in a song with the refrain, '*Baile, baile*!'

The forest ahead was dense. Down the valley the road went like

a hidden tunnel. Their song in chorus pleased Ramesh. How sweet it sounded! What did it mean? May be some primeval lore.

'Binu', Ramesh roared.

Binu hurried up to him faltering on the rocks, full of bitterness and abuse inside. At fifty-five, sans six teeth, an expanding bald patch at the centre of the head, his body would like a leisurely pace, quiet and ease. But this young officer would hurry up everybody, run like mad himself and drive others mad. Binu had enough to live on and could easily do without the job. But bereft of the power the position gave him, would he not be shorn of his magic, reduced to only one among the numerous insignificant fellow-men on whom he had fed all his life? And it was this fear that drove Binu up the hill.

'Binu, how nicely these folks sing,' observed Ramesh.

'Very nicely indeed, Sir.'

'But what does it mean?'

Tossing his *pugree* from side to side and giving another twist to the betel inside his mouth Binu spoke like a wise man, 'Of course, it is that song of the Chaitra festival.'

'But what does it mean?'

'That same old story of Dhangdas and Dhangdis* and their love for each other.'

'Do they always sing the same song?'

'Always, Sir'

'But does *baile* mean jasmine?'

'You have got it right, Sir. At this rate, you will be a master of their language in no time.'

Ramesh was pleased with this answer. 'Do they sing the same song even in their old age?'

'In this land of ours nobody grows old, Sir!'

Ramesh imprinted on his memory that *Baile* is jasmine and the Kondhs only sing of love.

Binu felt happy at having befooled Ramesh.

And the Kondh labourers continued their trek singing their tale of woe, the unending story of misfortunes; all the while heaping

*Unmarried Adivasi boys and girls, respectively.

abuses on the officer and his wretched peon. Groups of Kondhs met them along the road, laughed, exchanged jokes and joined the singing, for they too shared the same kind of fat.

When there was a lull in the singing Binu shouted at them and asked them to continue.

'Nobody grows old in this land of ours!' Binu's own words assured a new significance for himself. He thought of Gori, his youngest wife, his third, whom he had snatched away depriving another one his eager hopes, by paying extra 'bride-price' to her parents. In this wilderness superiority depended on snatching away things and in that man excelled animals. But behind Binu's efficiency lay concealed the frustrations of a life-time. He had orchards, lands, houses and cattle in plenty, but no child. With growing years he felt more and more acutely the need for a son. He remembered Gori and became anxious as to how his two elder wives would be treating her. In this country, if a woman did not feel happy with her husband she just left. Was Gori unhappy? And then he remembered that youthful peon, Bisi, a distant grandson who often came to his house to crack jokes at his grandmas!

'Binu!'

'Yes, Sir.'

'How is it that the smuggled rice is not detected any earlier? For smuggling to the south they must be stacking the rice-bags somewhere for the traders to carry them away. But though we have been travelling for four days, nowhere we saw any such stuff.'

'How could it be detected unless it moved in bulk, Sir?' Binu sounded a bit rude and repented immediately. He had himself succeeded in smuggling out a hundred maunds of rice at exorbitant rates. He believed that in a society which left everybody to fend for himself, pulling others' legs, trying to cheat others and thriving at others' expense was only natural and right. Breaking rules for one's own selfish ends—of course not without the fear of being caught—was nothing unnatural. He tried to twist the direction of the conversation.

'They don't carry too much each. At the market, Sir, you will see only small buyers from the plains down below. Only a few miles away is the border and there the businessmen would be waiting with

bullock carts, Hessian bags and pots of money. Then cart-loads of rice would move to Vizagapatnam, Patbatipur and other places. Traders know how to go about it. . . .'

Ramesh looked grim. 'We must stop the rice from reaching the traders,' he said.

His eyes shone like those of a hunter. A single question agitated him. Why should others steal our rice? He saw it as an encroachment on his own possession.

While speaking of 'our rice', he meant only one thing—that he was an Oriya. Behind him lay the history of Orissa, the story of wars, empires and expansion at the cost of the neighbours. From the dust-heap and broken bricks of the past his mind returned to the degenerated present and sought to put the blame for the situation on the neighbouring states.

'Those fellows have already eaten up our country and have made it all hollow,' he said.

The forest inspired in him an urge for hunting. His mind got intoxicated with the prospect of hunting down the rice smugglers. 'Only if I could catch them!' He clenched his teeth, but he did not know what he would do if he succeeded.

He hurried down the slope of the hill.

The late winter mixed with the heat of the walk gave the feeling of spring. Trees were full of foliage and flowers. At the end of the slope was a small village. Mango groves, fields, threshing grounds, rows of houses. There stood a small boy who, at the sight of strangers, cried for his mother and ran away. The calves tethered on the roadside, strained at the ropes and started mooing. The women folk withdrew inside and stared from their hiding. One by one the villagers came near. Ramesh found the scene familiar. His feet started dragging. He stopped under a bushy tree and looked back. Behind him stood the hill, like a monstrous ghost. Binu was coming down slowly, panting, and the Kondhs behind him rushed down.

'Can we get some drinking water here, Binu?' he asked.

'Of course, Sir.' Binu was all attention. He opened the luggage pack and ran into the village with a glass and a tumbler. The Kondhs sat down for some respite. Ramesh waited. In no time there reached a rope-cot. Somebody stood with a tumblerful of hot milk. Another

had brought a bunch of ripe bananas and a mixed drone of Oriya and Telugu peasants pleaded with him, 'It is too hot, Sir, the villagers would feel most unhappy, Sir, if you do not allow them to host you to a poor lunch and rest!'

Rest!

Ramesh laughed. The same invitation all the way. As if surrounded by forests and hills men only wanted to lean on other men. Relax for a while, stay on in our village for the night. Shadows of known trees, the slow, trailing smoke emanating from half-known thatched roofs, men and women engaged in the familiar rituals and daily chores. Men living in forests were different from the forests; living on the hills were different from the hills.

But he must move on. That affectionate welcome of the village left behind would persist as a sweet fragrance for a while and then drift away in the breeze.

Binu returned with some water. Ramesh drank if off and said, 'Let us move.' Suddenly an old woman appeared before him. A smile lighting up her time-worn face, she said, 'At this late hour, my dear son, how can you go away without some food? Would your mother have let you do so? Don't you have mothers and sisters in this village?'

Everybody smiled. The old woman was of the Kondh-Dora caste, an admixture of Kondhs and Telugus.

Suddenly Ramesh felt heaps of cool shade piling on his sunburnt eyes. But he said loudly, almost trying to persuade himself, 'No, no, we have to move. There is so much to do.' He dragged himself forward. The shadow of that old woman's motherly face remained transfixed in his memory. A mother alone knew the child's hunger, said 'alas!' for the child's pains. She had no caste, no language. She was the mother.

The job on hand was forgotten for a while. But it came back again when he saw people on their way to the market carrying rice.

'Binu, how far is the market now?'

'Just a little away, Sir. We have almost reached.'

'Take care. No shouting, no noise any longer!'

'Binu cautioned the Kondhs not to sing any more and walk silently. It was now a stealthy march like hunters in a forest, silence outside, but so much noise raging inside! Ramesh raced hurriedly in

his mind over the projected action. He would not merely stop the smuggling today, but also would suggest a permanent cure for the evil, in his report to the Government. That would bring him commendation, recognition and hasten his pace up the ladder of promotion. It was like winning a prize in the examination. He felt he richly deserved it. For was he not like Livingstone in the dark Africa? The explorer's expedition was to trace the source of a river; he was trying to locate the culminating point of the smuggling at the border. He felt overwhelmed with his own efficient and skilful handling of the matter.

A little ahead, on the road-side, a family was having its meal in the shade of a tree. An infant twitching its wiry hands and feet violently lay on the ground, with its face to the sky and gave out a sharp cry. The shrivelled figure of a young woman, hair all dishevelled, left her leaf-plate of food and without even washing her hands, pulled away the torn rags covering her breasts and hurriedly put them to the child's mouth. The dried-up breasts dangled like rags. With the child pressed to her breasts she kept staring at the strangers. As though she was no person, but only some dishevelled hair and two indifferent distant eyes! There was no eagerness for any news, no care for anybody's greatness in those eyes. Though apparently she looked out on the world outside, her eyes were concentrated deep down in the flesh, to the dregs of the life-force where the ultimate love, bird-like, covered the offspring under its protective wings. Three others were also eating rice: an old man, an old woman and the husband of the young woman. Only bones and skin, caves of eyes and masses of dense hair on the head. The eyes sometimes glittered. The rice shone on the leaf-plates. It was no eating, it was a hungry dog's gobbling-up food, breathlessly. Under the tree the rim-broken and decrepit cooking vessels and the improvised fire-place lay gaping at the sky. The scene made an assault on Ramesh with its naked reality.

'Binu, who are these?'

'The Telugus from the valley, Sir. So many like them roam the jungles driven by hunger,' answered Binu and turning to these people, asked, 'Where is your home?' After two more repetitions of the question, the old man replied, without lifting his head from the leaf-plate and looking rather annoyed, 'Simachalam'.

Binu explained to Ramesh that the place was sixty miles away. Ramesh remembered: once upon a time it was a part of Orissa. History assumed the size of a huge dark hill, then it became smaller and smaller, almost becoming a mound of earth and then, suddenly it sank in the gaping, cold eyes of that young mother who was now feeding and fondling the kid. Ramesh knew in a flash that the place may no longer be in Orissa, but it was there very much a part of the earth; it had its inhabitants and the inhabitants went without food.

'So many like these are roaming the forests, Sir. The bigger fear of hunger has made them fearless of the lesser dangers such as the tigers and the bears,' said Binu.

'Quite so, quite so,' the Kondhs echoed. They had drawn nearer and an old Kondh said, 'When hunger or pain attacks, men are all alike. Look, how hungry we are now. Where is the arrangement for food, *Chaprasi babu*?'

Silently Ramesh walked ahead.

Suddenly he felt a creeping confusion darkening his objectives. He wanted to do justice, but no longer knew what that word meant. Always he had depended on the short-cuts of established rules and conventional modes, always he had bowed to established laws, written rules and had felt it unnecessary to look deeper to see what lay behind them. Sometimes his sense of justice and fair-play had conflicted with the law but he had persuaded himself that duty was always hard and as ruthless as the movement of a machine. Driven by hunger somebody had stolen something, his pregnant wife had perhaps rolled and cried on the verandah of the cutchery with a year-old child in her arms and entreated that there was none else to support them. But nothing had mattered; a thief, after all, had to go to prison. That was law. Somebody else had suffered a year's imprisonment for the theft of a pumpkin because he had not changed despite five earlier convictions. Relentless and cruel were the demands of duty, he concluded; no place for softness there. He resolved afresh; he must catch the rice-smugglers.

The noise of the market could be heard. The rotten fishy smell of raw hide was everywhere. Men emerged in groups from behind the forest trees. Some had headloads, others baskets hanging from the two ends of poles balanced on their shoulders. Small children

peeped out of a few baskets. Bunches of fowl, legs tied together and heads dangling, various other commodities and rice. The prey seemed very near at last. Ramesh felt a sudden thud in his chest. Almost hopping down from one stone to another, he shouted, 'Binu, now we have had them!'

The market could now be seen. Men huddled together, swarming all around like ants. A kaleidoscope of colours, of many a smell, an orchestration of droning voices. Offensive smell of raw hide choked the air; rows of stalls sold dried fish. Flies buzzed everywhere; so did the men. The smell of illicit liquor came wafting in the breeze from the neighbouring forest.

Lepers and men with 'yaws' disease, like dogs with weeping wounds, patches of raw wound of 'yaws' with small dark insects sitting on them. Healthy men and women pushing their way through them.

Ramesh's eyes fell on a young girl with the colour of *chompuk* flower and a well-carved body. A Kondh beauty. One of her cheeks had a patch of 'yaws', the other cheek was looking red but there also 'yaws' had started. Yet she had decorated herself with flowers and moved slowly, a picture of grace, munching something. And she looked from the corners of her eyes which seemed to smile and invite others to a play.

Ramesh closed his eyes and leaned on a tree in the centre of the market. Waves of noise were breaking on his ears. The mind's eye continued to see that young girl with 'yaws' on the cheeks and smile in the eyes and the Kondh boys dancing on the hill-top.

And then he knew. In the midst of dense forests, on the top of hills, men lived. The fire in his fireplace survived the howling wind and the cruel merciless weather.

For man was like the *Dalua* paddy; more the water, more the plant grew. 'Yaws' on the cheeks and smile on the leprous face. Straining all the life-force a rose had blossomed even though its petals were crooked and worm-eaten. It may wither and fall. Yet it smiled.

Binu opened the flask and poured out tea. 'Sir,' he called. Ramesh opened his eyes. The crowd was growing thicker around him. Binu whispered in his ear, 'Lots of rice are selling, all can be caught but not right here. There is a strategic point beyond the market, a narrow

depressed lane leading to a thatched house. There we can wait. From there it would be almost like shooring a tiger from a *machan*.' Binu smiled.

All of them went there. Ramesh sat on a chair. Binu left, saying, 'I'll be back after making the final arrangements for the operation.'

Ramesh kept sitting. A little further away on an elevation on the hill-slope was a Kondh hamlet. Rope-cots were spread out in the open. Dogs waited near men, wagging their tails. Some kids were beating a huge drum to their hearts' content. On the doorstep of a hut sat an old man, vomiting. And old lady caressed his back. Must be malaria. A goat stood on a broken wall and munched the twigs of some tree. Time flew by as Ramesh kept his eyes fastened on that scene. He wiped the sweat from his body, tried to take out the dust of the market from his nostrils. The day was drawing to a close; shadows lengthened in the late winter sun and the picture of an ordinary hamlet with its simple everyday world lay spread out in that faded background.

Suddenly somebody cried. People came out of their houses and rushed to the hut which was the source of the cry. In no time there was a crowd. Scratching their cheeks and beating their chests they all began crying bitterly. Gradually it stabilised itself into a piteous rhythm, a chorus of lament:

'Alas! Alas! He is dead, he is dead.'

Binu was back. 'I have arranged everything, Sir. The *paiks* were in the market. I have asked them to drive all the smugglers here.'

'What happened there, Binu?'

'Nothing very much, Sir. Somebody is dead. Must be out of hill-fever. Nothing new in that.'

Binu kept standing behind Ramesh. Ramesh kept listening to that lament. Ever new, ever old. The wheel kept turning: life, death, reproduction. The pictures melted and took new shapes. In his mind's eyes floated up his village Kantipur in North Balasore. His home, parents, neighbours, familiar old folks, familiar children and familiar girls; all the distance from the burning-ghat to the centre of the village, the shrine of the goddess Chandi. Death, life, regeneration. They too were men who loved peace and tranquility, who had no quarrel with life and who suffered pain even though doing no harm to others.

The refrain of the chorus of the death-song continued.

So many had gone earlier, so many. In dark nights the villagers light up torches of fire and invoke them, 'Come back in darkness, return in light.'

The vast plain of death lay ahead of him. There, language and country did not divide. All were equal.

Standing behind him Binu too thought of his home and his youngest wife. Was Bisi paying visits to her? Suddenly he slapped himself. Ramesh looked back. Binu was rubbing his cheek with his palm. 'These are big mosquitoes, Sir. Their bite is very painful,' he explained.

Ramesh gave a start. He could see himself lying on his bed, shivering. Eyes bloodshot, body dark as a bear's. It would start at one hundred and three degrees of temperature and make one feel the urge to bite, abuse and run amuck.

Vomiting, heat, more heat and then?

Birth, death, reproduction, birth, death.

Mind forgot laws. Birth, death, man.

He suddenly began seeing everything with new eyes! Men walked, many men, getting lost in the dark. But the stream did not end. It flowed on and on.

The market was coming to a close. Men were moving. He felt he knew everybody, all these people, personally. Pressure of wants at home, oppression of life outside. And yet they move on. Caste and language did not matter. They were men. His villagers, men familiar. In the unending stream an ant looked up to other ants, an ineffable smile flowed from its dried-up eyes as it seemed to say: We are brothers, we walk on our feet and work with our hands: we belong to the same land, this ancient earth under the sky. Our enemy is common: those who snatch away the little food from our mouths, crush us to death and heap hot ashes and cinders on us.

The stream of ants flowed on. In the depth of Ramesh's mind the unextinguished lamp of smile and fire continued to burn.

There was commotion outside. The *paiks* were coming, followed by men carrying baskets and bags. In a moment Ramesh changed into the officer he was. He stood up and accepted the salute of the *paiks*. Binu rushed forward and said, 'They are being dragged here in groups.'

The *paiks* said, 'Kindly see, Sir, how these fellows were smuggling away rice from this market to the plains below. The baskets and bags have only a top-dressing of chillies, turmeric and tobacco but underneath there is rice. They will sell the smuggled rice at exorbitant price. For a handful of rice they will eat up the flesh and blood of men.'

Ramesh looked again. An army of skeletons stood facing him. Ribs showed as iron shafts of a hoeing machine, skins dangled on the ribs as on a bat's body, the bodies all twisted, bent, only heaps of oil-less hair on the head and tiny flickering eyes. Were they men or the ghosts of men? Entreating in their strange language; now weeping, now pointing to their cave-like bellies and mouths, now dangling their slender, weak, wing-like hands. In the hamlet on the other side, the dead body was brought out of the hut. Presently men were jostling about, throwing their heads forward and weeping in a chorus.

'Alas Alas! Who snatched you away? Who ate you up?'

And down there in the narrow lane below the hamlet, the living ghosts entreated and prayed, beating their chests and heads: 'Oh God Almighty, Oh father.' The *paiks* roared, and Binu shouted, 'No, no, that won't do. Open up the bags, show the rice.'

Ramesh closed his eyes, something tottered and crashed inside his head. The exhaustion and hunger of the long trek closed in and submerged him. Eyes shut, he could only see the confused, crazy, jumble of men, 'yaws' on their cheeks, smile on their faces, shrivelled skin on their persons and glitter in their eyes. Everything was,mixed up, inseparable; the piteous wailing for the dead, the heart-rending cry of deprivation and poverty, the fire and storm raging in the caves that were the eyes.

He looked; the cry was continuing. 'Have pity, Sir, have mercy, you Almighty, see our condition.' Before him stood a tall skeleton of a man, as if made of dried palm-leaf. Two long hands went up, joined in salutation and then slowly drooped. They could crumble to pieces anytime! An empty, hoarse voice entreated, prayed: 'Have pity, my father.' What was the language? Ramesh did not know. But the meaning was obvious. Prostrate on the ground and stretched right up to his feet that shadowy figure raised its head and the eyes looked Ramesh straight in the face. That look took the shape of the look of some known person, known to Ramesh, known to all. It

emerged out of every person when hunger struck one and looked quizzically as if from a mirror. Ramesh felt he knew all these people intimately, like his own villagers. No longer did he see their shapes and forms; the familiarity with their inner self over-powered him. That human form in front of him was his long-dead Uncle Sapana; the same dishevelled hair, a madman's unshaven face, the same gaping pits on the thresholds of the bones. Only he looked more tired, more hungry, more frightened by the terrible vision of death. The other old man, moustached, all bent and crooked, was as if none other than the hapless blacksmith of Kantipur village!

And those urchins with only skin and bone. Were they not his village boys who had entered his garden and ate up all the raw guavas? And those women looking like tattered, frail, leaking boats—were they not his village women rushing to collect fallen dry leaves for fuel early in the morning? Ramesh tried to hide his eyes, hanging down his head. Only, his brief murmuring could be heard: 'Go, go away.'

Binu could hardly believe what his boss said. Did he seriously mean it?

'Sir, but Sir,' he muttered with anxiety.

But Ramesh only repeated, 'Leave them. It is getting late. Go away, go.'

Binu groped in his memory for the image of authority. Certainly it was not like this: this young man, soft and kind hearted, hardly knew the world. Moustaches just sprouting, slim, with a delicate voice. Hardly an officer, he concluded. Real *authority* was like the tiger. Over the years Binu had seen many. In his twisted lips there was a strange expression. It signified neither a smile, nor any ridicule.

Ramesh kept standing. For him there was no more history. There was no Kapilendradev, no Purushottam, no Konarak. There was no special distinctive image of the men who form the backbone of a country or a nation. History was devoid of meaning. There was nothing but ants, ants; everywhere, hungry ants carrying mouthfuls of food in their struggle for survival and the stream of ants converging on ant-heaps for yet another expedition. It must live.

Ramesh felt a shudder. The brief sunshine of the late winter had faded. All around a thin layer of blue haze was spreading. It was evening. He felt the cold of the month of Magh inside.

The Somersault

THE day Jaga Palei of Sagadiasahi defeated Ramiawan Pande of Darbhanga to enter the finals of the All-India Wrestling Competition—being held in the Barabati Stadium—the sky was rent with the jubilant shouts of thousands of spectators. It was not the victory of Jaga Palei that excited them so much. It was Orissa's victory. Orissa had won. This was the feeling everywhere.

At that moment, Jaga Palei became a symbol, the symbol of the glory and the fulfilment of the hopes and aspirations of the Oriya people. A sea of humanity surged forward to greet him, to meet the heretofore unknown, unheard of wrestler. The waves broke on each other, there was a stampede. At least twenty-one persons had to be removed to hospital. The situation became so riotous and uncontrollable that the police had to be called out.

The crowd that returned home that evening included those who had their shirts torn, watches and fountain pens lost, and their bodies sore. But everybody carried in his heart the Oriya national consciousness. And something more, which can be termed as the intoxication of heroism. As if each one of them was a Jaga Palei!

Newspapers flashed photographs of that momentous wrestling match. All the Oriya papers raved in Jaga Palei's praise! 'Jaga Palei—Orissa's glory': 'Jaga Palei—Orissa's honour'; 'Jaga Palei, the unparalleled Oriya wrestler'. 'Never-heard-of-before wrestling at Cuttack!' 'Jaga Palei, Emperor of athletics'; 'the Newest Success of the Unbeaten Wrestling Artist' and so on.

Excitement spread rapidly to the rural areas as soon as the newspapers published the news. Many cursed their luck that they could not witness such an epoch-making event.

The week that followed could legitimately be called 'Jaga Palei Week'. In buses and in trains, in hotels and in the village Bhagabattungi, the talk was only about Jaga Palei's wrestling feat. The news completely over-shadowed all other daily news like 'Rocket to Mars', 'Man's flight in Space', 'Death of Lumumba' and the subsequent daily events of Congo's politics, 'Success and Failure in Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Elections', and many other exciting changes in the country. Since there were no auspicious marriage dates in the coming year, hundreds of marriages were solemnized in the fortnight following this event and in these festivities a frequent subject of discussion was Jaga Palei's wrestling?

'Did you go to see the wrestling?'

'How did you like it?'

Even if one had not gone, one had to answer, 'Oh, yes, of course; it was simply wonderful.' It was almost as if to say otherwise was to do worse than confessing to a guilt.

During that 'Jaga Palei Week', a small five-page booklet could be seen on sale in crowded places. The poet: 'Abid'. Price: Ten paise. Hawkers were seen hawking the song-book with harmonium accompaniment in front of the cutchery, railway station, bus-stand and at big squares. Glass-framed photographs of the wrestling event went up on the walls of photographers' studios, and also at sweetmeat-and-tea-stalls and pan-shops all over the town. Alando Mahila Mandali, Olangsha Yubak Mandal, Gababasta Grama Samaj, Bamphisahi Truckers Club, Ganganagar Sanskritika Sangha, Uttarward Kuchinda Minamandali, Ghusuri Abasor Binodan Samaj and many other institutions passed resolutions congratulating Jaga Palei and sent them to the press.

Even though his name gained such wide currency, Jaga Palei of Sagadiasahi still followed his traditional profession of carrying gunny bags in the malgodown. He had done this job ever since he was fifteen; from the day his father Uddhab Palei had returned the bullock carts of the moneylender, had come home, slept on the spread-out end of his dhoti and had never woken up again. Uddhab Palei had got an attack of pneumonia. The Chhotamian of Mohamaddia Bazaar had come and tried to exorcise the evil spirit. Govinda Ghadei of Janakasahi who kept different tablets in his shop inside

the cutchery premises for curing different diseases, had administered four different tablets, bitter, kasa, raga (hot) and saline respectively. For this he had taken one rupee seventy-five paise. Karuna Gosain, the sage of Tinigheria had prescribed that he should feed eighteen bundles of straw to stray cattle on a Wednesday and then lay himself prostrate on the dust of the street. Uddhab had obeyed this prescription as well but nothing helped. He died without discovering whether mankind had discovered a cure for pneumonia.

It was thus that Jaga Palei was left fatherless in the big city, with no job, no savings, no help and the greedy eyes of the well-to-do on his two-roomed thatched house and three gunths of land. Widowed mother, two minor siblings—Khaga and a twelve-year-old sister Sara. Well-wishers arrived and proffered their advice: 'Sell the plot of land, build a small house elsewhere and with the balance start some business.' The argument appeared prima facie reasonable. The ancestral plot of land may have been in a congested locality; nearby was the main road where a gunth sold at seven hundred rupees. With two rooms on it, it could fetch three thousand rupees. Wouldn't it be so much cheaper to purchase land and build a house in Tulsipur, Bidanasi, Uttampur and around the Dairy Farm?

This is what the plot of land looked like: at its back a dirty, dark drain, on the right a tank whose putrid water continuously threw up bubbles, on the left a washerman's house and a *bustee* that extended far; in the front, a lane hardly six to seven cubits wide and the back of the boundary wall of the double-storeyed building belonging to the moneylender Garib Das. Through the chinks in the boundary wall black waters oozed down and accumulated in the plot, increased, expanded and a stale.

But Uddhab Palei had not sold that small plot of his ancestors, nor did his wife and son sell it. The advice of the well-wishers remained unheeded.

Another bit of advice from the same well-wishers was that the members of the household should take up jobs as domestic servants. Or else who would maintain them? At fifteen Jaga looked quite a man. Various offers came; an apprenticeship in driving bullock carts, operating machines in a saw-mill, service in shops. A babu suggested a domestic service with the chance of a peon's post later. Another

person came and told him that Jaga was very fortunate as his sahib wanted him to be his personal valet. No work—Jaga would only be required to accompany him wherever he went, bits of miscellaneous works according to his orders and there would be no end to the good food, tips and a salary to cap it all! Jaga was given the dream of flying in cars and planes, sleeping on thick mattresses, wearing costly clothes and eating good food. Many would come seeking little favours through him, flattering him in diverse ways. It would be for him to make or mar them. He would be a strong, stalwart person. The babu had done everything for those who depended on him. After all for him money was just like clouds and pebbles!

Jaga Palei listened to everything in silence. A voice seemed to whisper within him: 'Do not listen Jaga, close you eyes, say 'No'. No, you must not become a servant. However, ferocious a dog with a thick blanket or fur, impressive tail, huge body and large teeth—a dog is a dog at it master's call. It can only lick his boots and lie chained to a post. A dog seen from its master's car staring from behind the glass-panes with big open eyes at the road and stretching its tongue may inspire the onlooker's admiration. Nobody, however, can ever forget that it is only a dog.'

To fifteen-year-old Jaga Palei such thoughts came naturally; for in his veins flowed the tradition of endless ancestors—people who tilled their soil and preserved an unbending tensile dignity which three generations of urban living had not corroded.

Jaga turned his back on all the offers and persuasions and chose the life of a daily wage-earner, carrying loads every day. His mother did not object. With the help of her daughter she opened a small snack-shop in the front room of the house. His mother had a knack for preparing good and tasty food. Sales were brisk. Khaga went hawking ground-nut and *bara bhaja*. Thereafter he took a job rolling *beedis* in a factory. The family of four lived on; nobody died, the house was not sold. From the outside everything looked the same. Four persons became of one mind, suffered hardship and privation. Nobody came to know anything of this.

Jaga had one obsession in life. Physical culture. Early inspiration for this came from his father's godfather, the old khalipha of Sagadisahi. Jaga remembered his mango complexion, the physique of a young

man, the flowing beard, the look of a child in his small blue eyes, and the green turban. Once he had tugged at Jaga's shoulder and asked him why he did not attend his akhara. He had asked Uddhab to hand Jaga over to him so that he could make a wrestler out of him. Uddhab had smiled and agreed. That was the beginning.

A couple of small rooms in an old building near a tamarind tree with a compound wall. That was the khalipha's house. No wife, no children; nobody knew if they were ever there. Only a single pleasure in life, the akhara. Only the akhara inside his compound. Early in the morning, before the darkness folded, Jaga would go to the akhara and do various types of gymnastic exercises including practice with the club, the lathi and wrestling. Many joined the akhara; many also dropped out. But there wasn't a sunrise when Jaga Palei would not be seen coming out from the akhara, after his exercise.

The khalipha knew people in the other akharas of the town. When wrestlers from other towns came he would arrange a contest. Jaga emerged unbeaten. The town people who cared for wrestling soon knew his name. They would praise his iron-like body, the lightning speed of his reflexes and the marvellous tricks he had learnt from the khalipha. But rarely were these people from the higher circles of society.

Mostly they were shopkeepers, tailors, butchers, drivers, carpenters and so on. This lack of fame in all sections of society was in part due to the khalipha's regulations. No showing-off, no publicity. Only during Dussera and Muharram was there a tradition of his team going round demonstrating its skill. There would be competitions, of course.

As he grew up as a wrestler, Jaga had various other offers of jobs. One was a watchman's job guarding somebody's house with a rifle or a lathi. Good pay. The other proposal was amazing. Enough food, monthly salary, special payment for special sorts of work. And the work would be of the age-old, time-honoured kind—to act as a Kichaka; in modern terminology, goondaism. King Virata had been defended by Kichaka. Now new empires had opened up in business, trade and industry. And empires always needed Kichakas. It was for the master to point a finer at his enemies. Then varieties of actions could follow: staring hard at somebody, rendering one lame, breaking

someone's neck, confining somebody illegally, locking someone up in a house, throwing stones at somebody's house at night, accosting somebody on the way, so on and so forth: if dragged to the court the master would defend his Kichaka through lawyers without getting identified.

There was another proposal too. He would be somebody's son-in-law and remain in that household and enjoy the property. Somebody had perhaps appreciated his health and charm while looking down through the window of the first floor of a building. This proposal he turned down as well. What remained was the old work—carrying grey bags of cement from one place to another and getting paid per bag.

After the big wrestling match that day he found strangers jostling and crowding round him. Lights flooded on him from many directions and snaps were taken. Then came a torment of questions. Questions and more questions even before they could be answered: 'How long have you been in wrestling? Who is your guru? Ah, Omar khalipha! Whom did you defeat earlier? Please give a list. What prizes did you win? What is your diet and in what quantities? Are you married? How many children? What do you consider necessary for health and long life?'

Somebody from the crowd shouted, 'Do you agree that vegetable ghee is very conducive to good health? Ah, you have never taken that!'

More questions. 'How many cups of tea do you take per day? What tea? You never take tea? Couldn't you please tell us the truth, Sir? What *beedi* do you prefer? Which *gurakhu* do you use? Which party do you support? What do you think of the recent changes in the country? Oh, when can you grant an interview? We would like to publish your photograph along with your signature and your views on our commodities: flash it in cinema slides and finalize the dues. Please, your autograph please.' And all the time, more jostling and pushing about. The waves were breaking. And that solved many questions for the questioners could hardly remain in their places. Jaga Palei felt suffocated. He stood in grim silence and folded his hands. That too was photographed. Then he turned and ran through the crowed, still afraid that they might follow him.

First he went to his guru and fell at his feet. The khalipha embraced him, his flowing beard touching his chest and back and said: 'That's a good boy; you have preserved my name.' Jaga hardly noticed the praise from other quarters. He knew somebody must win and somebody must lose. Just as in this contest he had won and the other man was defeated.

From the khalipha he went to the temple and listened for a time to peaceful music sung to the accompaniment of the tambourine. On his way back he heard the radios blaring forth news of the wrestling. A little later the newspaper-vendors, carrying bundles of papers, were shouting the same news. His head was reeling. Instead of going home directly, he went to the Kathjuri embankment. Returning late at night, he found an elaborate meal awaiting him: rice, dal, mashed potato, fried brinjals, fish curry. His family members embraced and patted him and praised him in their own way. Excepting a few neighbours, no one else came to look at him. He was relieved.

Before dawn the next morning he was back at his exercise and then the daily carrying of bags. He did not say a word to anybody about his profession and his private life. Newspapers gave out the fact that he was a labourer. He was not aware how the news had spread; but even in that area of the malgodown people would stop him to congratulate him and ask about his wrestling. They would tell him about his high place in the world of Indian wrestling and how he had raised the prestige of Orissa. They said he would have a great future only if he won the last round. That would bring him glory and status and take him to wrestling matches outside Orissa and even outside India. He would go to Sri Lanka, Singapore, Mongolia, Peking, Japan, Russia, Germany, America, Africa and so on. Along with prestige he would also earn a lot. For all this, he had only to win the last round of the All-India Wrestling Competition.

And there was also a lot of useful advice! He should take greater care of his diet, health and practice; he must take fruits, mutton, milk, vitamins; he ought to be careful. After all he had to hold aloft the prestige of Orissa and later of India.

The flood of advice made him sigh wearily. He only saw mutton when walking down the tired streets. Milk was a dream. And by fruits

he understood banana or at the most coconuts. All that he aspired for was a seer of *chura* per day but his domestic budget was tight and rarely permitted more than half a seer.

A few days later a large number of unemployed labourers came to town from down South. They camped in the open under a tree and all that they wanted was to earn some wages and somehow exist. The wage rate went down. To Jaga's utter misfortune, his younger brother, Khaga, met with an accident while returning from the *beedi* factory. He had fractures and multiple injuries and was carried to the hospital. This added to the woes of the family and Jaga's daily worries.

A new-comer opened a small hotel at the end of the village street and started selling various types of delicacies and sweets and cakes and tea. Benches and chairs were provided and food was served on sparkling clean plates with a fan overhead and music from the radio. The number of customers started dwindling at the shop run by Jaga's mother and sister. Wants stared him in the face from every side.

And yet Jaga Palei persisted with his wrestling. His diet came down from half-a-seer to a quarter seer or chura and fried rice worth only four annas a day and one coconut in three days. He would fill his stomach with some rice and whatever green leafy vegetables were available. Hunger would burn fierce in his stomach. When there was no work, Jaga could be seen sitting in grim silence, lost in thought. He would feel how lonely he was, how friendless, forsaken! Everybody had forgotten him a few days after the wrestling match.

Three months passed. Then came the fateful day of the final test: Dilip Singh of Punjab versus Jaga Palei of Orissa. When it was over, the newspapers flashed the report along with an analysis of the match. All agreed that the wrestling, the artistry and skill which Jaga applied against the heavily-built, massive Dilip Singh were superb but the odds were against him. It appeared that Dilip Singh would fall flat, but ultimately he won.

Dilip Singh's life-sketch appeared in the papers. All the great men in the wrestling world were his patrons. There was also information about the variety and quality of his diet, how his weight was taken every day and many other facts about him. Jaga Palei was again in

the wilderness. Fresh discussions started in trains and buses and in crowded corners. Some people even expressed resentment against the man who had soiled Orissa's name; many were unhappy and crestfallen. Even that was quickly forgotten.

But the day after the wrestling match, like any other day, Jaga Palei quietly went back to his exercise and his job of carrying the bags.

Two Heroes

THEY regarded each other as heroes. Jagu Parida and Gumpha Swamy. And admired each other a lot. On their way from their office to the residence of Gumpha Swamy they would talk about various matters while enjoying a smoke.

One was from the village Sandhakud in Kujang estate. He would recollect the privations, the poor diet, the long walks with which he completed his primary education and then his secondary education while performing as a cook at the residence of the Manager of Kujang estate and finally his graduation with the help of a meagre income through a private tuition at Cuttack and how at last he could stand on his own two feet, victorious in that great war between his dogged ambitions and his predicaments; ill-fed, ill-clad, sometimes even without food, how he had managed to row on his battered boat; how he had educated his younger brother, married off two sisters, spent around seven hundred rupees for his ailing father though that could not keep him back and he left the world leaving them behind. Now he had his own world consisting of three daughters, a son, himself and his wife. He had no savings, had rather incurred some loans which, of course, he could pay back. He had no house of his own, only an official apartment, no land but a job after all. And above everything else an unflinching faith in God. For, who else except Him sustained all, everything?

His words were nectar to Gumpha Swamy's ears, though he was a little man measuring only up to his ears in height with a slight hump of the cheek bones just below the eyes, his chin sharp as a crowbar, a pointed nose sparkling at the tip that would surely be quivering when he was excited. His eyes, his nose, his face, all seemed

designed to convey varying moods of emotions. His clear, transparent face, the slightly-thick lips as if knew only to speak clean unminced words. His skin was brownish, but with a healthy glow on it. Whose memory did that face, the sudden swerve, the ripples on the shoulders, that child-like sparkle in the eyes, whose memory did they awaken?

Yes, whose else but Apu Dorai's, ruminated Gumpha Swamy. Apu Dorai Aiyar, his intimate friend in the college. He left his studies for Malaya or Singapore and never again they met. Gumpha got married. But Apu could not see his wife. In those happy days of bachelorhood how much had they imagined, discussed and joked about their wives-to-be! Apu had then given him a picture of his future wife. Strangely enough most of it tallied with the real wife Gumpha got. How had Apu known? How often did Gumpha wish he could show his wife to Apu and say, 'Here she is, Apu, once a creature of our imagination, now come alive; bow to your sister-in-law, Apu!' But it was not to be.

Apu was four years younger. He was from the distant Trichur district, had lost his father at seven, and had started going to school very late. Banking on him his mother had opened a coffee shop. He had then a five-year-old brother, another aged three and a sister just nine-months old. Apu would leave his bed early and help his mother prepare cakes and some other snacks for the shop. He would remain absorbed in work for the whole day. In course of time, he learnt how to stitch paper-cups, prepare different types of cakes and even to sing. A blind, homeless beggar took shelter on their verandah. He knew many compositions of the celebrated musician Thyagaraja and could render them in correct *ragas*. Only his voice was broken and rough, constantly choked with cough that would sometimes break out in endless spasms. But Gumpha's voice was very sweet. People admired his renderings of Thyagaraja. Many customers were attracted by his songs and they would have a fill of the snacks the shop offered. In the evening he would sing in gay abandon. That was the rush hour at the shop.

Suddenly one day one of the customers took it upon himself to educate him. He was a Malayalee, Bhadrappa, the new postmaster. It was his care, encouragement and help that pushed him up through

four classes and a scholarship another four and he ended up becoming a teacher. The household chores, the coffee-shop, reading late at night, and the endless struggle with the demands of the world—the winter and the inadequate warm clothes, drooping eyes and pouring over books in shivering cold, warming up the palms by rubbing them together or by taking some exercises—constituted his routine. The only fire-pot would be near the beds of the three younger ones. Summer brought all the physical strain in the sweating heat—and privations as usual. With a degree and a job things could somehow be managed but the wants remained.

With his mother's death the coffee-shop closed down. However, he managed to educate his two brothers and got one of them married. The family now consisted of himself, his wife, his younger sister and his five sons. No savings, no house of his own, no lands; somehow they managed without ever being in debt.

Jagu Parida looked at Gumpha Swamy affectionately. A tall hefty man, dark-complexioned, rounded strong hands and feet, a fleshy face, the curly black waves of hair parted in the middle of the head, a prominent mark of vermilion on the forehead, the face ever lighted by a smile, eyes half closed below the bows of eye-brows and the face glowing with a serene smile indicative of human sympathy, peace and equanimity. Sometimes Jagu felt that he could unburden himself only if he spoke out everything to that man.

After listening to Jagu when he would turn his head to the left or the right the eyes would sparkle and glitter and reveal an inner excellence.

Strangers, they had developed acquaintance of a fortnight only. With his office shifting to Bhubaneswar, Gumpha Swamy had come recently. Jagu was there from the beginning. The office employed seven hundred persons coming from distant villages and different towns. At five in the afternoon, they would disperse in flocks in diverse directions mostly on cycles, small groups engaged in conversations.

In that little world of seven hundred folks, Jagu and Gumpha had picked on each other. Their allotted seats were at the two ends of a big hall. Between them lay endless rows of tables, chairs, almirahs and piles of files. On both sides stood rooms like pigeon-holes and

some of them walled by almirahs. So many faces in enclosed space; so much history had taken shape! Yet Jagu and Gumpha gravitated towards each other from two opposite directions. One could almost feel that they had, with effort, found out each other.

But it had all started simply, one day at those cubicles of urinals near the western door in the office. Jagu was rushing forward his shoe-heels clattering in the corridors. He woke up from his absent-mindedness when he saw another person seeking to get in at the same time. But the other person stopped and asked Jagu to proceed. Jagu had not noticed his face clearly then. He had a good look at him only upon coming out of the cubicle. The other person smiled and went in.

It was this little incident that had brought them together. Jagu did not go away. The pungent smell of phenyle and detergents was thick in the air. It was not a fit place to tarry. Jagu walked about a little. The sky peeped in through the huge open door. Buildings, isolated trees, the slope of the hillocks and the horizon beyond it—rows of trees in a distant village. Flocks of goats grazing near the bushes and ant-hills, white electric poles, the sun shining all over and the birds on their wings. His eyes grazing on all this, Jagu was ruminating over the face of that stranger, the man who was nobody to him and whom he did not know. Jagu wished he had stepped back and allowed him to proceed first into the toilet.

The door opened. The stranger came out, saw him and smiled softly once again. A conversation ensued, but with few words. But there was emotion and feeling in them and the medium was neither Oriya or Telugu but English. Difference in accent was only too obvious. But they never tried to speak like the *Sahibs*. They understood each other and that was all they needed.

They went outside. At a little distance from the main gate, Gumpha Swamy purchased cigarettes for Jagu, and Jagu purchased pan for Gumpha Swamy. Their relationship had started.

Thereafter, almost every day they saw each other and talked about their joys and sorrows. Intimacy developed very fast. They talked as if to lighten the burden of their misery and of their struggles for living and in the process drew nearer each other. They knew they belonged to one class; the class of human beings who live on their labour and

sustain themselves fighting against tremendous odds and strains, their boats ever trembling on turbulent waters, but never sinking. No savings, no buildings; perpetually chased by want, poverty staring them in the face. Disease and deprivation often tore them asunder in a routine manner.

Winter brought problems and one had to run about for raising loans. Yet, in the midst of it all, the household continued; fire burnt in the hearth, children grew up; marriages and festivals were celebrated and nothing really stopped. Social manners and etiquette were also sustained. Above everything else there was the primary need to preserve the hopes, the dreams, the loves and beliefs that constituted one's basic humanity.

In their respective houses too they used to discuss each other. One day, while returning from the office, Gumpha Swamy almost forced Jagu to pay a visit to his house. 'For a long time you have been only promising to come. I am not going to leave you today.' Jagu condescended, smiling.

Small buildings in rows, all alike, with equal areas of barbed-wire enclosures and wooden gates. Individual differences were spelt out only in the landscapes within those enclosures. While some were choked with wild growth of grass, others looked full with picturesque flower-beds, kitchen gardens and occasional rows of other plants. Gumpha Swamy's garden had banana plants on the left with bunches hanging from some of them, two rows of *papaya* trees, small patches of tomatoes and brinjals, pumpkins and gourds hanging from *machans* and in little plots lush green spinach. On a small circle in front of the house soft yellow chrysanthemum looked like moon-light rolling on the ground. That was the special beauty of his garden, Jagu observed. Else banana and *papaya* were in all the gardens. A twelve-year-old boy was digging the soil. Two boys, hardly a year's difference in age between them, were watering the plants. The three looked alike with their shorts and bare bodies above the waist.

'This is my house. Please come in,' Gumpha Swamy said as he opened the gate. The three boys did not leave their work but smiled. Gumpha smiled back and said, 'This is *Mausa*, Come and do *Pranam*.' The boys did that and Jagu immediately entered into a conversation with them, asking them their names, the classes

they were in, whether the taps gave enough water for gardening, so on.

'Where is Ami?' Gumpha asked. Ami was his younger sister and had gone to the neighbour's house. Gumpha suddenly remembered that his guest still stood outside. He led Jagu in. Then he ushered in his wife and the sons and introduced them to him. Jagu bowed to Gumpha's wife. Then they sat down and talked.

Jagu almost forgot that this was his first visit to the house. It was not merely the loving welcome or the conversation. Somehow he felt as if he belonged there, all these people were his own, the intimacy went back to ages. They had no special curiosity about him. They had accepted him with ease, as if he was always there. The light inside their hearts were reflected on their faces and love was growing on its own, untutored, spontaneous.

Jagu looked at Gumpha's wife and had a feeling that he knew her. A bony sharp face, somewhat long, seasoned with worries, hopes and emotions. The grinding pains of keeping a family going in the hard days, the anxieties over five children, sacrificing herself every day through the unwritten troubles and litanies of living, all these had played their role in carving out the picture of her personality. One could imagine her in her many roles: sweeping the floor with her sari-end tied round her slender waist, scrubbing utensils, cleaning, cooking, serving. Diseases, stomach upsets, fever, cough, nights without a wink of sleep—she would be serving the family almost like a machine. On several occasions she must have taken severely ill; but must have gone without complaints or passing orders. Instead she would stand it all, quietly go about, light the fire-place and see that the children ate their meals.

Occasionally she must have grown conscious of all her sorrows, all the poisons of *Sansar* and with blazing hot sighs she must have called out to God in whatever name she was familiar with. Occasionally too, she must have thought that she had reached the end of her patience. Then she must have wept and wept and lightened her burden of grief and eased her tense nerves and moods.

And she too must have laughed and smiled, occasionally her sparkling eyes scattering laughter, hope and happiness on others.

White-complexioned, tall and slim, snub-nosed, her arms and legs

were round and healthy, her mouth somewhat large, lips thick and a deep look characterized her flowing eyes under very prominent and thick dark eye-brows. Hers was not an organised beauty one meets in an advertisement. It was not the beauty of a mere toy, full, elegant and decorative. Yet it seemed poised to possess, to inspire, to cool the eyes and pacify the nerves. It was what gave equanimity to the mind, steadiness to the soul. Maturing through different forms of happiness and unhappiness, hopes and despair, every bit of that beauty spoke of life and its myriad experiences, the mysterious hidden story of victories and defeats of many days.

In keeping with the normal etiquette, Jagu did *Pranam* to her but after that, through his look, he did several *Pranams* as if wishing to convey, 'I know you. I know with what magic a two-hundred-rupees need is met with an income of a hundred rupees! I know, you symbolise that energy, that still bigger force which defeats all the powers of the world which combine to destroy a family and makes it live and grow. I know, this is not an image made out of ordinary clay. This is living history.'

She talked in broken English with the southern accent quite evident. Jagu too spoke in English, his Oriya accent unmistakable. She was in a long blue *sari*, worn in the Southern style. Her hair-style too was Southern with chrysanthemum flowers tucked in. The ornaments on her nose and ears and around her neck were slight and they also had the imprint of the South.

But the difference of language and dress did not touch Jagu at all. The thought that continued haunting his mind was that she was somebody near to him: one like his mother, sister, cousins or even his own wife. She belonged to that womanhood built on solid foundations of duty and responsibility: to rear and nurture were her destined jobs.

After a while Gumpha Swamy's wife went in to bring coffee and snacks. Jagu and Gumpha plunged into conversation. Two loving souls sought to discover new aspects of each other. There was no need for discussing things they knew earlier. None had interest to discuss the problems of their services careers. Their talks now veered to social customs, tradition, men and society. This took them all the way from Kujang to Trichur, from politics to the achievement of independence

and a hundred other things. They found that on many subjects their experiences and opinions were the same. Even where they differed the dialogue was enjoyable.

As they continued talking, coffee was served with *idli, upama, chutni, curry*, etc. Gumpha's wife joined the conversation for a while and went in again to attend to household duties. Lights were put on, children came in and went to study after eating their snacks. The two friends, away from the world of newspaper publicity, meetings and conferences, whose opinions never reached the authorities and even if they did they counted for nothing—went on with their observations on almost everything under the sun. The language problem, India's foreign policy, the Fifth Five Year Plan, economics and administration, the refugee problem, America, Russia, China—nothing was omitted.

After their coffee they smoked and the discussions continued uninhibited by procedure or official rules. There was no hesitation arising from the fear of their comments being heard or reported. They basked in full freedom of the domestic bliss.

They seemed to open up more and more. And then nobody knew how it happened. Without their knowing, their eyes began to sparkle and streaks of impatience began to show in their manners. Their voices rose in a crescendo. Children closed down their books and listened to their animated dialogue from the other side of the door. Gumpha Swamy's wife listened to the talks intently, almost holding her breath, from near the fire place. She wondered whether or not she should appear before them and intervene in the talks. The happiness on her face had given way to anxiety and a sense of fear.

The two friends had entered into a few controversial chapters of history of the two neighbouring States, Orissa and Andhra. It appeared as if they were the warriors from two opposite camps who had suddenly climbed down from the temples of Puri, Konark, Bhubaneswar, Himachal or Tirupati!

Jagu asserted: 'Orissa was a land of heroes. The farmer-soldiers of Orissa, the *Khandayats*, were famous all over India. The work *Khandayat* itself originated from *Khanda*, that is, the sword.'

Gumpha Swamy was not to be outdone: 'In our Andhra Pradesh

too the Naidus and the Rajulus were famous warriors. They inscribed their names in history in undying letters of blood.'

'The area between Krishna and Kaveri rivers belonged to Orissa. Oriyas lived and ruled the region.'

'Impossible!' shouted Gumpha Swamy with a heavy jerk of his head. 'We know, Orissa extended only up to the end of Chilka lake. Later, Oriyas left even that place. The north of Rushikulya belonged to Orissa and down south it was all Andhra territory.'

'Will you then ignore history? Purusottamdev himself died on the banks of the river Krishna. At the time of Pratap Rudra the headquarters of Ray Ramanand was Rajmahendri.'

'They were only temporary victories in a long war, when one nation fall on evil days and is weak, another nation gets busy conquering its lands and collecting taxes. That does not mean sons of the soil give up their language!'

Jagu almost shouted, 'Don't you find Oriya names everywhere? Kalinga Nagar, Kalinga Patna, Odabadi, Visakhapatnam, Bijaya Bahuda. After the British came, even proper names were sought to be converted to Telugu. Jamadeipur became Jimidipeta, the forts, i.e. *Gadas* became *Gedda*. In temples and in forts, the innumerable copper-plates and the numerous gift-deeds inscribed in Oriya—above all the imprints of history—all that cannot be washed away by words! I tell you, Sir, this nation has been throttled. It has lost Midnapur, Singhbhum, Raipur, Phuljhar, Bastar, Ichhapur, Jalantara, Budar Singh, Manjusa, Tekkali, Canagaraj, Madagol, and all those areas in the south. It was only yesterday that they took away even Sareikala and Kharsuan.' Injured innocence and resentment at being wronged seemed to cry out through his voice.

'Orissa might have lost elsewhere but it lost nothing in the south. There it was rather the Andhras who lost,' rejoined Gumpha Swamy. 'For example look at Paralakhemindi. With what logic is it in Orissa? Or the Rayagada and Gunupur taluks of Koraput district. Who understands Oriya language there? And yet Andhra Pradesh was throttled and without any rhyme or reason Orissa's rule was imposed on millions of innocent Andhras.'

'What do you say, Sir? Parala, Rayagada and Gunupur? How

many Telugus are there in those areas? When did they come there? Have you seen those places?'

'What difference would it make had I seen it? So many people have seen it and written about it. Have you visited all the places you mention?'

'You may look up the Gazetteers, the reports of the Commissions and, of course, recorded history. From Choda-ganga, Narsimha to Mukundadev.'

'I have seen and I am also a student of history. You have mentioned Pratap Rudra. But don't forget Krishnadeva Raya. Highly learned, well-versed in music, great warrior and a great liberal! How many kings were there in India like him? His court was like Vikramaditya's. Krishnadeva Raya was the glory of Andhra Pradesh; his reign a blazing reminder of the glories of the Andhra Pradesh; his reign a blazing reminder of the glories of the Andhra Satavahanas. Unjustly the kings of Orissa used to rule over large tracts of Andhra territory. Krishnadeva Raya avenged that injustice. He first liberated the fort of Udayagiri and imprisoned Tirimalia Routray, the uncle of Pratap Rudra. Then he occupied the famous fort of Kondavida in the mouth of the river Krishna. There Prataprudra's son Virabhadra was taken prisoner. Thereafter other forts were occupied; Benukonda, Balakonda and then, the famous Kondapali fort. Along with the queen, two prices and seven ministers of Prataprudra were taken prisoners. Marching on to Simachala Krishnadeva set up his victory tower there and then proceeding further north, liberated the entire seaboard. You must be knowing, Sir, on what condition Prataprudra entered into a treaty.'

Gumpha Swamy paused and added with a smile, 'Prataprudra gave his daughter in marriage to him and made him his son-in-law. And as regards Mukundadev, he was himself a Telugu who occupied the throne of Orissa. This, after all, is history.'

'No, no, no,' shouted Jagu, 'there are too many elements of fiction in it. Mukunda was not Telugu. He was of course a man from the south and because of his manners and customs he was called a . . .'

The ship of conversation had hit a rock and come to a virtual halt. It had merely hit the ground, its bottom had given way and it was sinking slowly. The intensity of Gumpha Swamy's invitation, the

overflowing love of Jagu Parida, all the care and affection of Gumpha Swamy's wife and those feelings of intimacy and homeliness of the evening had vanished in no time. They were no longer even friends. it was, as if, two unknown enemies had encountered each other on the way, recognised each other and were preparing for their action.

It was at this juncture that the door opened and Gumpha Swamy's wife entered, followed by her children. A broad smile hid her sense of fear and anxiety as she asked, 'What are you discussing? The stories of kings and emperors, is that so? I thought only the wandering minstrels sang about them.'

Gumpha Swamy looked serious. 'This is history.'

His wife replied, 'Please keep your history to yourself. They say if you read the *Mahabbharata* at home, there is bound to be a quarrel. Do you think if your Krishnadeva Raya lived today, he would have made you his Minister? Or would this gentleman have been taken as a Minister if Prataprudra or Purushottam was the ruler? In their time too the poor toiled and sweated to keep themselves alive as they do today. The womenfolk worried as ever as to how the fire will burn in their hearth and how the children will eat something and live. The wars fought by your Krishnadeva Raya or Prataprudra must have hit the heads of those poor and wiped out their hearths and homes. The towers of their victory must have been built on heaps of human heads.'

The two friends were taken aback. Her face flushed, excited and tearful. They stood up.

She resumed, 'Which history is giving food to your children today? Work hard, keep the family going or else that is the end. It hardly matters which language you speak: Tamil, Telugu, Oriya, Bengali or Punjabi. Dress as you like. But remember God, take shelter in Him and walk the path of righteousness. Then only can you live as human beings in this world. Ah! you men folk! With solicitude, anxiety and efforts women create, preserve, protect and nurture and what devil possesses you that you are impatient to demolish the whole world and allow everything to go up in flames in no time?'

'No, no, it was nothing, it was nothing. We were only talking.' The two friends spoke out together. The immediate past had

vanished in a moment. Ease had returned. Gumpha Swamy smiled. Jagu Parida did the same.

'Tomorrow evening all of you are coming to our house. I will come and pick you up' said Jagu.

'Sure, sure', replied Gumpha Swamy. This time it was not merely a nod. His whole body jerked forward as he spoke. Jagu got up, overwhelmed with joy.

Gumpha Swamy took Jagu's hand in his and along with a rapturous, hard hand-shake, whispered into his ear, 'We are two brothers.'

Jagu Parida put his arms around Gumpha's waist, embraced him and said, 'Not merely in this life, through but many lives past.'

The House

SADASIVA got down with his family and all the cluttered-up luggages from the train from the South. He was on transfer to Cuttack. When they reached the rickshaw-stand just outside the platform, his daughter Mandakranta asked: 'Father, where is our new house?' Sardula Bikridita, who was two years younger to Mandakranta, was overwhelmed with joy at the thought of a new house. 'Our house!'—he exclaimed and danced with joy. Little Anustup and Gayatri joined the chorus and romped about and shouted cheerfully.

'Is the pitcher left behind in the railway compartment?' Damayanti asked her husband as she followed him as they went out of the platform.

'No, I have brought it, Come along,' said Sadasiva.

'Don't you shout so much!' he reproached his children. People were staring at them. It was quite natural, because their luggage was heavy. Several coachmen came running towards Sadasiva, each offering his service.

'Father, how far is our house from here?' Mandakranta asked again.

Sadasiva did not reply. He despatched the luggage first and then hired a coach for the family. He looked at his wife inside the coach. She was in the family way.

'How are you?' he asked her tenderly.

'Well,' she replied briefly.

'Don't trouble your mother,' Sadasiva cautioned the children.

'House, our house!' Sardula cried again.

All the children now shouted in chorus: 'Our house! Our house!' Sadasiva and Damayanti sat facing each other. She smiled at him and he lowered his face.

Sadasiva was on transfer to Cuttack after a period of twelve years. Not that he had not come to Cuttack off and on. But he was coming with his wife and children for the first time. The town was familiar to him. He was born in a small village about eight miles from Cuttack on the other side of the river. There, on the ancient homestead of his forefathers, chillies and brinjals would be flourishing now; and he could also visualise the dark-green and circular stem and thorny round leaves of the pumpkin on the forsaken paternal homestead.

Rows of buildings lined the road. Buildings everywhere. Bricks and sand-heaps; trucks speeding past with bricks and iron rods. .Nobody bothered if a man was run over. The victim would have died in any case, sooner or later, in one way or another. Progress was not impeded. There were vehicles everywhere, vehicles owned by the rich. Cuttack was, after all, a busy town, prosperous, crowded, teeming with varieties of people.

Sadasiva had left Cuttack twelve year ago. He had moved throughout Orissa, from district to district. His daughter Mandakranta was born in Balasore, Sardula Bikridita in Koraput, Gayatri in Russelkonda, and the child who was yet to see the first rays of the rising sun in Cuttack, was conceived in a remote corner of the far off sub-division, Mankadnacha.

But where will it be born? Which house? 'This town is meant for the rich', Sadasiva said to his wife.

'There is no place for us here!'

'Come on,' said his wife.

'Do you know what is the problem?' said Sadasiva with pensive melancholy, 'People who ought to die at a particular age do not die.'

'What is the good of your worrying so much about it?' Damayanti consoled her husband. 'We will get a house sooner or later!'

'Yes, we will.' Sadasiva clenched his teeth and muttered, 'but it may be a long time in coming.' He sighed out of a sense of futile indignation and looked angrily at the dusty road ahead.

There were motor cars everywhere, chasing one another.

Their destination was Ratnakar's house. Ratnakar was an old friend of Sadasiva, a dealer in iron and steel in the post-war market. Apart from the narrow passage room, it was a very small thatched house. The costs lay close to one another and the personal effects were

heaped under the cots. Some of his belongings were also made to hang from the roof by means of slings. Whatever little space was saved was meant for the living of the family. Ratnakar had five school-going children. He, his wife, children and servants were all accommodated in this small house. Besides, the dog, the cat, the cows and the rats had also their places.

It was only natural for anyone to be surprised at Ratnakar's readiness to act as the host to an old friend. But unexpected things do happen in life. The unreal becomes real. Unexpected generosity, unexpected cruelty, unexpected events are a part of life. At least Sadasiva believed it to be so. He would contend that it is futile for us to live unless we have faith in the unexpected. In his miserable condition and his slender income, however calculating he may be, he found to his dismay that the result was starvation, debt, insolvency, and darkness, unless something unexpected happened. He compared life to a Greek tragedy.

So Ratnakar had ventured to write to his friend, 'You can live with me for a month or so. I have no objection.'

There was a thatched cottage, adjacent to the small house of Ratnakar, and it appeared as if it was only waiting for Sadasiva.

It was a cottage of wattle and daubing. There were no windows for ventilation. The doors were made of split bamboos. There were inside it some tools and iron implements, some empty and broken wooden containers and some junk. Then there were three almirahs containing books of the children, two tables and five chairs.

Three cots were placed in the middle of the room and yet there was some space left on either side.

'This is the house', said Sadasiva.

Ratnakar, followed by his wife, came forward to greet the guests. The children of both the friends looked at one another.

That night it was dark and raining heavily. All of them were sleeping on the cots. Sadasiva woke up suddenly. He did not know why. This is life, he thought. Man ought to die of cold and rain, but yet he does not die. Somehow he finds shelter at unexpected places and continues to live.

He was grateful to his destiny and to his friend, 'But what next?' he wondered. 'What next?'

He started up from his bed as he felt something like a rat scampering away on his hand. He knew that the rats had an unhindered access to this house. They played and ran about the room even when there was light. He heard a variety of sounds under his cot. Also, there came a stench from somewhere.

Sadasiva brought out the torch kept under his pillow. He saw that an old dog was sleeping under his cot. From the tip of its nose to the tip of its tail it was without any hair.

This dog, he thought, has also a right to live in the house. But . . . in order to assert his manliness, he wanted to chase the dog out in return for the hospitality he had received. The dog was determined not to go out into the darkness and rain. Sadasiva chased the dog and the dog, in its turn, dodged him. The cots, almirahs and chairs in the room stood in Sadasiva's way. The man and the dog started playing the game of hide-and-seek, running from corner to corner. The dog participated in the game with much enthusiasm.

Chasing the dog to and fro for about half an hour, Sadasiva retired to his bed. The dog did not scratch its skin any longer. It only heaved a deep sigh at intervals. The stench of its skin was there, of course, but the dog was not responsible for it. Reconciled to life Sadasiva fell asleep listening to the music of the rains. Next morning, the rays of the sun were pleasant. Sadasiva felt, as if, the world had taken him to be a Kumbhakarna* and was intent on waking him up by deafening roars and noise from all sides.

He lifted his head slowly and saw a flock of sheep and a pair of bullocks trying to enter his house through the open door.

Sadasiva set out in search of a house early next morning. He put a small box of 'pan', a bundle of 'bidi' and a match box in his pocket. He had the entire Sunday at his disposal. It is a country where personal effort counts most. Situation compels a man to discover his personality. Sadasiva reasoned with himself. And so began his bicycle journey in search of the uncertain. In his mind he cut out the Capital town into four sections for convenience and planned covering it in four days in search of a house.

*As described in the 'The Ramayana', Ravana's brother who used to sleep throughout the year and woke up only to eat.

The people he contacted were the *panwallahs*, the touts of the street, a few acquaintances and colleagues. They were the people who could possibly give some information regarding the availability of a house.

And he did collect a good deal of information. He also came to know a number of new houses and people. Whenever he got some information about a house, he would jot it down in his diary, and run at once to look it up. But he was always disappointed.

'There is no house,' the owner would say.

'But this house is not occupied by anyone,' Sadasiva would argue.

'A gentleman has already booked it.'

'Can I get that new house after its construction has been completed?'

'No. Another gentleman paid for it in advance with which the bricks were purchased and the foundation laid.'

There was no house anywhere.

Sadasiva acquired much knowledge of the topography of the town. What a big town! How many streets! How big, indeed!

The town had grown larger; its residents were building their houses while Sadasiva was touring the interiors of the State. The war-market and the system of controls enabled people to grow rich overnight. There was no dearth of black money and no dearth of rich people in the town. But there was dearth of a house for him.

From whichever angle it was seen, the town looked large and new and strange. Old familiar scenes were no more. Two-storeyed buildings stood in place of ponds where swans used to swim. The swamps and wastelands with their thick undergrowths and bushes had given way to crowded streets. Buildings were coming up even in waist-deep water. It appeared the people in them mocked at Sadasiva.

'We have occupied everything,' they seemed to say, 'A labourer has no place here; no place, go back. . . .'

Once he lived in a small house in this town. The recollections crept into his mind as he walked past the site.

There was a Neem tree under which the house stood. Now its frontage looked slightly modified. Sadasiva stood surveying the house. It was now a homeopathic dispensary.

'Whom do you want to meet, sir?' asked somebody from within.

'None, just so.'

This house no longer belonged to Sadasiva. It belonged to his past. There was a house in the other street in which he lived for a period of four years. Standing near the doorway he could recall the inner apartments. And some scenes of his early youth, too!

He could recall his neighbour's house, adjacent to his study room; the moonlit nights and the voice of a girl singing to the accompaniment of a harmonium.

Sadasiva stood in front of the doorway. Would there be a lot of noise from within as in those days? Would his pet dog, Bhalu, come running in order to greet him? Bhalu was fond of sweets.

'Whom do you want?' A fat gentleman asked hoarsely. Sadasiva was startled to hear the strident voice of a stranger.

'Does Sadasiva Babu live here?' he asked.

'No, see ahead.'

Sadasiva lowered his face and moved forward. Suddenly he became conscious of what he was doing. Whom did he want to see? It was his own name he took! If he wanted to see himself, he should not go forward. He should go backward and search for himself somewhere in the past. A motor car come rushing from behind. Sadasiva moved to a side and tried to lean against a wall, but in vain. The swiftly-moving car sprayed the muddy water of the road and soiled his clothes. Those who ride cars are well-dressed and well-to-do. How will they understand the difficulties of the poor? They have no time to think of them. They are busy with their own affairs. The people who ride cars are the slaves of their vehicles. The pedestrians of the street are the victims of the vehicles of the rich. They do not know each other.

The muddy water of the road which soiled his clothes brought him back to reality. He had lived in many a house in this town. But why in this town alone? Had he not lived at many places in this world?

In how many fire-places fire had burnt for him, in how many stations he had wiped his sweat! And in how many different circumstances of life he had realised his own self!

Then every situation had flowed past.

He had been defeated and destroyed in the struggle of life, but

had every time emerged from the ashes of destruction. He was alive again, perhaps to fight with life once again.

He had no regrets.

By the time he returned home, it was evening and dark clouds were gathering. A day had come to an end. But no house was yet in sight.

After having combed the town up and down for four days, Sadasiva joined his office. He joined only in pen and paper, for there was no seat for him. The office was a beehive and the employees were the bees. A number of bees fly in to the hive while a number of bees fly out of it. Thus it goes on since time immemorial. Some of the bees are a bit big, a bit fat while others are a bit small, a bit thin. Some of them hum more and sting more while the collective humming of others is so faint that it sounds like a faint and pathetic conversation.

Sadasiva could arrange with much difficulty a narrow verandah on which he put a table, a chair and two benches in front of him just to put up the show of an official. Sitting erect in his chair, his hands on the table, Sadasiva looked on, his eyes wide open. He was an employee of this office. Here he can find and assert himself!

He looked around. He saw the excreta of goats lying at some distance. Some marks of cow-dung were left visibly on the floor. The smell of the goat was a preventive against tuberculosis and cow-dung was a disinfectant, he had heard. He felt that even here he was not the absolute master.

Then came a nanny-goat and her three kids. Sadasiva stared at them in surprise and they stared back at him.

Sadasiva had applied for the allotment of official residential quarters.

'The responsibility is not ours,' replied the superior officer. He had to fall back on personal effort. Companies are established on the basis of personal efforts, Sadasiva was advised, buildings are constructed, imports and exports are carried on. What then is impossible? If one cannot get a house, it is due to one's lack of efforts, one's lethargy, or one's misfortune at the worst.

There was no want of assurance. It appeared, as if gentlemen in

big towns were always eager to help people in difficulty. They chewed pan and smiled. They were decent in their behaviour.

'I will be on the look-out for a house,' they would promise. 'Do you mean to say that a house won't be available for you?'

And a fresh request when he met them the next day.

'What did you do about it?' he would ask.

'About what?'

'About a house!'

'Ah! it's a house, isn't it? I understand, I'll inform you when I get one.' Assurances were there. But there was no house.

Ratnakar never grumbled.

'What about the house?' Damayanti would ask him every evening, The child that was yet to be born needed a house.

Ultimately it was Damayanti who saved her husband. Sadasiva got a one-roomed cottage in the hospital for which he had applied for his wife's delivery. He moved there with his family.

Sardula Bikridita started dancing with great joy on the small patch of green grass in front of the house.

'House, house, our house!' he cried.

Anustup, Mandakranta and Gayatri also started frolicking on the grass. Beautiful was the grass and beautiful were the soft rays of the sun.

Damayanti was smiling from the verandah. Sadasiva looked at the clouds and thought what should be the name of the child that was coming.

The door of the neighbouring courtyard opened, and a funeral procession filed past.

Sadasiva was startled and shouted to his children, 'Ah, you kiddies, get into the house. Get in.'

Tadpa

TADPA was his name. Like all names a symbol and that was its justification. Otherwise it meant nothing. According to the rules of his language, maybe, it was not necessary to be related to a person in the minds of those who assigned names. After all he was a Kondh and his language was not Oriya. In his society the parents had no freedom to choose any name. All the villagers would gather. The priest would go on reciting an almost endless list of names; the ritual worship would go on with offerings of fowl, unbroken rice, coloured powders and raisin. The *kalisi*, the woman possessed, would be throwing one rice grain after another into a pot of water reciting *mantras* all the while. The name, the mention of which would make a grain stand erect, would be picked up by her.

That is how Tadpa got his name. To understand it one must go back into the past when an encyclopaedia of names was prepared. If one asked the Dongria Kondhs of Niyamgiri hills as to who prepared it, you would get the answer, like the answer to so many other questions, that it was Mahapru, the one who made day and night, the hills and the valleys. You may even be admonished: Don't you know who made all this? Why then ask like a child?

So it was Mahapru who created all this including the five thousand feet high Niyamgiri hills in Koraput district and the Dongrias living there, their language and society. Also, it was He who created this beautiful name, Tadpa. And the man Tadpa got it by His will.

And endless memory of the axe falling with thuds on tall trees and Tadpa remembered how miles of hill-slopes were shorn clean and then planted with oranges, pine-apple and jack fruit. Elsewhere the run-off on the top soil exposed only dark stones where not even a

blade of grass grew, only moss covered it and dried up. Somewhere else there was even now awesome forests with stout creepers and bamboos. At intervals of six to ten miles a small hamlet of five to fifteen houses and then, once again, the jungle.

Outsides were descending a fearsome slope of the hill when they met Tadpa. It was half past nine at night, in the later part of the months of *Aswina*. Niyamgiri was cool even in summer. And now the warmth generated by walking could hardly counter the cold. But they, numbering seven, had no time to feel the cold as they walked along a footpath which looked like a small tunnel meandering down in curves through stones. They had to walk with careful steps. Along the road, hidden by tall and dense trees, there was a rushing stream deep down the hills. One could hear the sound of its falls. A little carelessness and one could stumble and plunge into its waters. One small torch-light showed the way. After a week in the hills the batteries had become weak. There was always the fear of a tiger suddenly springing from the dense forest or appearing majestically on the road, facing you. So though they sometimes talked to one another, for the most part they walked in silence. Once in a while, through a chink in the wall of trees, they could see the gurgling stream in moonlight, with million moons floating down its flow. On the other side the cultivated hill-face had maize, bajra and mandia, all melted into a moonlit haze. Before them hung a picture extending to the horizon: numerous forms—hills, valleys, trees, hillocks, light, darkness, shapes solid and shadows—a silent massive vista.

They would stop a while, look at that landscape and merge into it in no time. Silent, lonely, full, timeless, unmoving; there, yet not there, almost lost. They would resume their walk along the narrow path, a hidden fear lurking inside all the while as to when the journey might suddenly meet its end. Wild animals, accidental fall, unknown dangers.

They came to see the Dongria Kondh hamlets on Niyamgiri for a serious purpose. The Development Officer, Parashuram, thin, tall, and experienced, led the party. He had roamed many hills while planning the welfare of the hill-dwellers and had come from Bhubaneswar. Behind him was anthropologist Bharata; he had studied the social system of several tribes, published some books and

was eager to know and learn more. He was about forty, short-statured, well-built and full of enthusiasm. Behind him was the local official Hari Pani; his work was at the foot-hill, but it was going to be extended to the hill-slope. His thirty year old body was a stubborn black granite. Behind him walked Madhusudan, the forest guard, nearing fifty-eight, dwarfish and a weakling. He had been long in the Niyamgiri hills and was considered a good guide. And finally the three *Chaprasis*, Makara, Najiru and Ramaya.

They set out from Bisamcuttack Railway Station and climbed the Niyamgiri hills, and after halts at several hamlets now they intended to emerge near Muniguda Railway station. The distance, as the crow flies, was fifteen miles, but through the hills it was forty-five miles of trekking over seven days. There were no regular roads and one had to negotiate narrow and sharp bends, steep climbs fifteen hundred to five thousand feet high, dizzy ascends and descends, getting up and down the slopes and spending nights on the narrow verandahs of the Cave-Like Dongria Kondh houses and accepting their warm hospitality. The drinking water was from the hill-streams which carried the dirt and washings from the hamlets upstream, including that of buffalo meat, for almost every third day a buffalo was slaughtered in a Kondh village. There was no dispensary, no post office, no shops, no police station, no well or tank and not even a tiled roof let alone a regular building. In short, there was no trace of 'civilisation'. Only the hills, the forests, the orchards and the crops and those primitive people known as Dongria Kondhs. With them lived the Dombs who had come up from the valleys in the course of time to earn a living. They offered liquor and occasional cash to the Kondhs who in exchange mortgaged their fruit trees. One bottle of liquor could bring a fruit-bearing orange tree or four jack fruit trees for a year. Two rupees could fetch a huge banana plantation. And for twenty rupees two acres of pine-apple orchard. The same with fields of turmeric, *archar* and other crops. The Kondh would raise the crop, hoeing the fields, protecting the crops from the predatory animals by keeping awake through winter nights and the Domb would take the harvest to the market and garner the profit. The Kondhs and the Dombs lived according to the ways of their society. The Domb houses had wide verandahs, large rooms fairly neat and

clean and sculptured wooden doors. They dressed well like people at the foot hill, with sarees, blouses, coats and shirts. Foreyards of their houses were always swept clean in the morning and their children read and became literate. Some recited *Puranas* and some wove clothes. The main occupation was carrying goods to the market place, a job shared by both the sexes. Supplementary benefits came from illicit liquor distillation, purchasing cattle from the valleys which were sold to the Kondhs, so on and so forth. The Dongria continued with his ancient lifestyle. The menfolk wore a loin cloth which was embroidered by the women in their small looms. The women wrapped a six-feet saree round their waist and when they stepped out fully covered themselves with it. The menfolk's clothes were always dirty, the hair on their head unkempt. The man wore rings on his nose and shells and small beads in the ears. The portion of the head just above his forehead was shaved clean and the hair was made into a knot around a comb. He wore chains of colourful glass beads round his neck, a pick-axe on the shoulder, a six-inch long knife was tucked at the waist and he held a sturdy stick made of local wood, embroidered in part. The woman wore garlands of thin glass beads of many colours and other ornaments of brass and alloys.

The man were much addicted to liquor. The *Salapa* tree sometimes provided it. But more often all the earnings went to the *Madhula* wine on sale. He would get drunk and lose his senses. There were endless festivities in the village, rituals and worships, buffaloes offered as a sacrifice to gods and their meat consumed in a community feast. Working hard round the year, he produced so many diverse crops and fruits in large quantity. And yet the Dongria remained as poor as ever, dependent, for the four months of the monsoon, on mango seeds and greens, bamboo shoots and powdered *Salapa* tree-trunks, sometimes only with a dash of *Mandia* or other millets.

They had by now a detailed look at the Kondh life-style, the officers and the anthropologist, talking to the Dongrias, to the extent possible, with the forest guard, Madhusudan, for their interpreter. They had taken down notes in their diaries. For a week they had discussed and debated what needed to be done for the Dongria's good. Their sincerity was so intense that for that whole week they

thought only of the Dongrias of the Niyamgiri hills as they roamed the villages observing everything in detail. That explained why they could leave Mutaguni village only at four in the afternoon though the labourers carrying their luggage had set out an hour earlier. Madhusudan had said that the distance through the Muniguda hills was about six miles. But then they had landscapes to view, matters to discuss and Professor Bharat was to take photograph on the way. The problems were known; what remained was a search for solutions.

Madhusudan gave his opinion: 'Sir, I have seen them all my life; they are as ever before. You can never find a better or more considerate lot. They won't have anything to do with injustice or falsehood. They are totally committed to their duties but they won't change their habits. They won't brush their teeth or perform ablution or go to school or give up drinking. Any advice in this regard would fall on deaf ears.'

Hari Pani had a different view: 'Everything changes and they too shall change, Sir. But first you need regular roads to go round the interiors of Niyamgiri. When forests open up, civilisation enters those who come from outside to serve them—and you need plenty of them—need housing, drinking water and other facilities. All this must begin coming up together with an investment of twenty or twenty-five lakhs: school, dispensary, piggery, orchards and some factories. And if fortunately some mineral deposits could be discovered then another Rourkela could be started and it won't take very long for these people to change.'

Professor Bharat looked at the problem differently: 'We have to consider what would be in their interest. The objective is not any change for the sake of change. They can never prosper until their exploitation ends. The trouble is, you cannot just throw out the exploiters, for they too are citizens of this country. So, it would be necessary to go to the very root of the phenomenon which thrives on the capacity of the exploiter and the vulnerability of the exploited. Whatever we saw of the Dongria on this visit had been fashioned by centuries of belief and world-view. It was not created yesterday. Who can prevent him from propitiating his ancestors and the gods with liquor and buffalo meat? Living on hill slopes in deep winter, with inadequate clothings, his body needed the warmth of liquor.

For him there was also no other entertainment. And so long this went on he would be wasting all his earnings and inviting exploitation. With education his taste could change but he had a fear that once educated his children won't grow crops. That explained his resistance to sending children to school and it was not wholly unfounded for there was no occupation other than primitive agriculture on these hills available to him and if one gave it up one had to migrate. To sum up, there is no escape from a programme of education coupled with restraint and promoting new attitudes. That needs time, heavy investment and trained workers. If instead of changing his attitude and his world-view we impose a change on him, it would only unsettle and destroy him despite our good intentions.'

And then Parashuram observed: 'Should we then continue to look on helpless till adequate funds were available, the Dongria children were educated and became new men and built a new society? Should they, till then, remain what they are today—poor, illiterate, exploited, vulnerable, almost like animals? What then was the use of all our knowledge about them? Was ours merely an intellectual curiosity? Can't we make even a humble beginning? Let it not be all the villages but only a few. Let us build relationship with them, explain and persuade. Let them sell to government whatever they had to sell and buy from the government channel all their needs. Let a few shops be opened for that purpose. Let government grant them their minimum requirement of loan and let workers' centres be opened and schools established. Once they saw that this way their earnings increased they would come to accept it. And coming in touch with the outsiders their taste and nature would also change. Along with this there must be training for better cultivation, provision for better seedlings and soon there will be some light in the darkness.'

Professor Bharat rejoined: 'Only if that could solve the problem! He may earn more but the saving habit would take ages to develop. The exploiter would go on devising new strategies; maybe instead of the crops and produce of his orchards, now straight to go to the liquor would be liquid cash. His goodness and simplicity would be lost in the process of his contact with the outsiders. The trouble with such contacts was that the vulnerable first picked up all the undesirable

qualities of the exploiter. He would become an opportunist, would no longer repay loans and purchase with cash from the market and on credit from the government shops. He would fall repeatedly into the traps of new exploitation. His present simplicity and honesty were perhaps due only to ignorance and superstition and not born out of any conviction or any ingrained idealism. Even idealists sometimes faltered, stumbled, had doubts but one could not notice any such thing here. It was all a picture of liquor, meat and indulgence in cheap pleasures. And if he still spoke the truth it was perhaps because he could not sustain a lie. And inside him there were many unknown fears. Once he knew the way, he too would become a cheat, a liar, an exploiter. I feel pained by his misfortune but it is not merely an outcome of his economic condition. It had to do with his mind. We need a strategy that would preserve his innate goodness and prevent the sprouting of the evil aspects of change. But I don't know how to go about it.'

Parashuram said: 'That problem of the mind was not merely of the Dongria but of all men, everywhere, in a greater or a smaller measure. If one could overcome that there would be no wars, no violence, selfishness or falsehood. So many thinkers have spoken of ways to solve the impasses and that too for thousands of years and yet things have not changed. Is that any reason why we should not begin somewhere but leave these people to remain helpless and poor as ever, all their earnings being eaten away by exploiters? We have to develop their economy and slowly there would be improvement in their mental set-up, their society. That is why I am ruminant over it, trying to find a way. Let us put our minds together. We have to make a beginning. We can't allow this destitution to last forever while we continue to discuss theories. There could be disastrous developments which would totally uproot them.'

Madhusudan said, 'Sir, they really live in great misery.' Hari Pani added, 'There was no doubt about that. But who can help till roads and other facilities are created? Would they ever come to us crossing the hills or could we come over to them every now and then? Whoever came to work here would find the going tough and find himself in the midst of disease, danger and inconveniences. After all, everyone is a human being. What is needed is minimum facilities

for work. Without that everybody would pay only service but none would come forward for real work. Surely, something needs be done for it is a sad comment on all of us that even today some people live in such misery.'

They had debated the issues openly and had expressed themselves. Then they became silent. They were thinking about it and as they did so they forgot the fear and the strain on the body. It was a forgetting of their personal misery while thinking about others grief.

But once again that receded to the background and the apprehensions of dangers on the way took precedence in their minds.

Suddenly, in the dense forest, they could spot a shadow. it was moving and then became steady. All of them came to a halt. Parashuram flashed the torch. They could see a person, bare-bodied but for a loincloth, an axe on the shoulder. A Dongria Kondh, about twenty-five years old.

'Who are you?' Parashuram queried. 'I am Tadpa,' he replied. 'Were you coming in babu, or returning?'

The group came closer to him. 'Give me a *bidi*,' he appealed. Madhusudan took out one. Parashuram gave a matchbox. He lighted the *bidi*, held the matchbox tight and said 'I am taking this.' Hari Pani said, 'We could have difficulty without it!' 'I won't hear that. If a child cannot take a thing from his parents from whom then could he take?' he replied.

Parashuram said, 'Let him have it. Surely, Bharat Babu has another!' Bharat Babu nodded. Tadpa looked happy and said, 'While coming down near the water fall I sat down and smoked. Then I could know that you all were coming. I waited but you people were late. I thought that you were not able to walk and in a forest you might lose your way. Anyway we never saw people like you at this late hour of night. I guess that you were afraid and that is why walked slowly. I thought that if I am with you, you would have no fear and also not lose track. So now come on.'

Hari Pani asked, 'Are there tigers in this forest?' Tadpa laughed and said, 'You could as well ask if there was fish in the water or stars in the sky. Of course tigers are there. Where else could they go?

'Has a tiger eaten up someone?'

'Eaten?' Tadpa asked. 'Don't you eat when hungry? It has eaten many and it lives near that waterfall.'

'But you were alone; were you not afraid?'

Tadpa said, 'Are you afraid when you go on the road? Don't people die, run over by car? That is your road, this ours. I am not afraid.'

Parashuram said, 'But why go out at night? Can't you do without it?'

'How can one?' Tadpa looked surprised that someone could even think that way! He then laughed and said, 'I climb the hill at night to guard my crop. Whenever there are other needs I walk into the forest. And today it is such a great need.'

'But what was it?'

'The need?' he asked and seemed to think. And then added; 'As such nothing; for at night you can't hoe the soil, nor fell a tree or break stones. Just like that.'

'But you said there was some need!' Madhusudan insisted.

Tadpa laughed loudly and then said, 'Yes, it is for a *dhangdi-bent*, I am on my way to Penubali village.'

Madhusudan too smiled. The others looked at one another. Then Madhusudan explained that he was going to get a bride. They have the custom of *dhangdis*. They were looked after well, spent the night singing and dancing and returned in the morning. In the midst of songs and dances they chose their life-partners and marriages are solemnised later.

'Why are you laughing so much, Babu?' Tadpa asked Parashuram. 'No doubt today you have aged, but surely someday you were a *dhangda*!'

'Yes I was a *dhangda* but have never done *dhangdi-bent*. That custom is not there in our society.'

Moonlight fell on them from the left side and from above. Everywhere there were shadows of different shapes. The sound of running water was like a prelude played out in a musical instrument.

Tadpa looked curiously at Parashuram and said, 'In an area where there is no *dhangdi-bent* the people must be animals or are they human?' Anthropologist Bharata asked, 'Why?' Tadpa replied, 'Only when two persons came to know each other through songs and

dances, laughter and play, that they could build a proper relationship. How otherwise, can they make it? No acquaintance, no love and yet set up a house like those people at the foot of the hill?' He raised his nose and the rings on the nose shone in moonlight as he added, 'We are not like that. We are Dongria.'

'Dongria is the King of Niyamgiri,' said Madhusudan.

'So you know it all!' commented Tadpa.

Bharat enquired, 'Is it true that the *dhangdi* does not sit in your lap, instead you sit in the *dhangdi's*?'

Tadpa grew serious. He nodded and said, 'Correct, quite correct, we sit in the lap of the *dhangdis*.

Then he looked inspired and asked for another *bidi*. Bharata put a cigarette in his mouth and lighted it. In one breath he finished off nearly half of it and then patted Bharat on the shoulder and on the back and repeated his answer, adding, 'Have you not done so?'

Bharata cautioned everyone not to laugh and yet there were subdued rippes. Hari Pani said, 'We know that the son sits in the lap of the mother.'

Tadpa threw away the cigarette and said, 'Nothing stronger? Give me a *bidi* if you have. Yes, the son sits in the lap of the mother. But is not the *dhangdi* a mother? Say, are you and I, mothers? We are sons. *Dhangdi* is the mother. When a child, we sit in the mother's lap. When we grow up, we sit in the lap of the *dhangdi* who chooses us.'

Hari Pani asked, 'In whose lap do you sit when old?'

Tadpa said, 'When too old and I drop dead I will sleep in the lap of another mother. Don't you know who she is?'

'Who?' asked Hari Pani.

Tadpa said, 'Who? This *Dhartani, Basumati*; she is the mother of all of us, who else? And she is inside the mother who gave us birth and also in the *dhangdi*.'

Bharata told Parashuram, 'Oh, it is so complex!'

Parashuram replied, 'Strange indeed.'

They started walking.

Parashuram asked Tadpa, 'So you are going for singing and dancing with the *dhangdis*. You have already done ten miles and you are to do another six miles or so! Your need must be very urgent.'

Tadpa laughed and said, 'I made a promise to go last Wednesday in the market. How can I break it?'

There was now a sharp descent and the forest was completely dark. Tadpa walked ahead and said, 'There is no cause for fear, just follow me.'

Parashuram said, 'Wait, let me walk ahead and flash the torch.'

Tadpa said, 'I don't need it,' said Tadpa. 'I am young and I can see the road.'

He refused to give in and continued walking ahead. 'These forests and hills are our home and you are our guests. So should I lead you or you should lead me? What would our village elders say if they heard of it? What would Bisi Majhi the head-man say? They would accuse me of spoiling their good name!' said Tadpa.

Bharata said, 'There could be wild animals.'

'They are like our brothers. No fear from them.'

They went further down. Now they were on the Sakata river, fairly wide, which skirted the hill. Tadpa entered the river and cautioned the others, 'The water is deep elsewhere. Please follow me.' It was only knee-deep water. The forest now appeared thin. Tadpa said, 'Now I would take leave of you. You have nothing to fear now, for in a little while you will emerge in the open. Your road is to the left, mine to the right. Another four miles over the hill and I would be at Penubali. Now your road is straight. Let me go.'

They halted. Parashuram gratefully thanked him. Bharata said, 'You have one us such a good turn' Tadpa went closer to Parashuram and said, 'Give me twenty-five paise, I will eat something.' Parashuram and Bharata laughed. He entreated, 'Come on, if I don't take from my parents for something to eat, from whom shall I take it?' Parashuram took out two ten paise coins from his pocket. Bharata brought out another. The amount was given to him. He thanked each one profusely and moved on with rapid strides. His song was heard from some distance.

They kept walking. Tadpa had vanished into the dark in no time. A little ahead something sparkled on the ground. Bharat bent down to examine it. It was a ten-paise coin. Next to it was another. They stopped for a moment. The coins had fallen from Tadpa's hand.

'If he had no care for money, why did he entreat us so much

for i?' Madhusudan gave the answer, 'That was his way of honouring you as his parents. Dongria is like that. Almost like a child. It is enough for him to get whatever he needed at a given time. Money is like pebbles in his eyes.' They looked back. Wrapped in hazy moonlight Niyamgiri hill seemed to have fallen asleep, as if it was a dream and not a reality. The road lay ahead of them. Parashuram suggested that they discussed a little more the strategy for the development of the Dongria Kondh. The discussion continued.

Destiny

KUMAR *Purnima* the festive full-moon night, was drawing near. Natabar was in the town to buy clothes for the occasion. It was afternoon when he deposited all his purchases in the house of a friend, a Moharir, and went out for a look at the town. The town appeared busy and impatient. Suddenly Natabar's lazy mood changed into a kind of wistfulness. He remembered a story from his childhood: a school-going child soliciting others to join him in play; but neither the ants nor the bees were free to join him. And finally the boy had to go to his school. What would these children be reading these days? Would it be the same old story?

Natabar looked at the primary school on the road-side. Children in different classes were shouting out their lessons in a sharp, rescunding chorus. All that could be heard was a mighty roar and not the content of the lessons. On the other side of the road a saw mill was hissing and humming, contributing to the noise. Natabar gaped at the saw mill for five whole minutes, then lost interest in it and walked along the road.

What would his youngest son, Kuna, be doing now? Natabar started musing. The boy had been very, very weak ever since childhood. The village Vaidya had said there were worms in his stomach. Pallid and lusterless skin; inflated tummy, hands and legs as thin as wire and the oversized head. And yet what did it matter? The boy was so fast in picking up his lessons, as if he were just seeping them in. At ten he had already mastered elementary arithmetic. His aliment, however, showed no sign of leaving him despite all kinds of treatment, and regularly feeding him with extracts of yams and

pineapple. Sometimes people asked if he could truly be the son of such a hefty father!

The eldest son, Buna, looked after the lands. It would be desirable to solemnise his marriage during the coming auspicious season. That was the reason for his night's half in the town. People of the bride's family would be coming to his friend's house where all aspects of the marriage including the details of the dowry would be finalised. Yes, the marriage could not be delayed beyond the month of Margasira. Buna's mother rarely kept well. Alas that lady! A sense of pity and compassion overpowered Natabar as he remembered her from this distance—fair as a Champak flower, made almost out of a single grain of rice, and the dense dark coiffure which cascaded down to her knees. Where did all that beauty and strength vanish?

It was the same human being, yet, taking her hand in his grip made him feel as if it were nothing but dough. She was only five years younger than he and at the most was forty. All that was left now were skin and bones, an expanding forehead with loss of hair, a reeling head, a burning sensation in the soles, a body that was given to frequent shivering. The Vaidya had declared that it was bile and wind-formation. Sometimes, when she coughed, he feared that no one would be able to save her. Texts born of wisdom said: 'if bile, flatulence and cough combine, the last breath will rattle in the throat—my dried-up numb soul. Everything was *Maya*, illusion. Only in this illusory world does one suffer all the miseries—my numb, dried-up soul'.

Everything was like the tide, rising and falling, ebb and flow. The inundated plains adjoining the sea, the snake-like river near his village, came to his mind. The tides came and returned; so too beauty, youth, wealth and children.

At such an hour the mind raced back to the village. The unknown *Babaji* (ascetic) had a small thatched house under the banyan tree on the river bank. He would hand over the *chillum* (an earthen pipe for smoking *ganja*) and add touchingly: 'Look son, the tide is in. Man's household is like that.'

There was no happiness here. This was after all a town. Every man for himself; the passed by, pre-occupied with themselves. Not a word spoken, not a word of sympathy. Natabar sighed and kept walking.

No particular purpose, only roaming around. Somehow the night was to be spent and he would take the early morning bus to the village. The landscape of the town. Bright red lips, the smoothness and glaze of young fruit on blossoming cheeks, multicoloured *saris* and pairs of women in open rickshaws.

Natabar again recalled Buna's mother, with a pang in his heart. Repeated childbirth, frequent attacks of malaria had reduced her to what she was today. He felt a sudden gush of sadness overwhelming him. Buna's mother only knew how to give, to sacrifice. She was now a pauper having sacrificed all her comforts unhesitatingly. She had never extended her palms seeking any favour.

Buna's mother had been exhausted of all her energy, courage and beauty. The walls and floor of the earthen house were always smooth and polished. The utensils sparkled like glass. In a corner of the courtyard the lemon tree would grow up like a dishevelled goddess, under her fostering care, and yield a bumper harvest. Likewise with all the homestead lands and attached gardens, ponds groves—the entire house-keeping and household. The earthen containers held different kinds of pickles and dried estables and they never went empty. Even the cowshed was so clean. Flies would fall of the healthy shining body of the cattle! She had spent years in nightlong vigils driving away mosquitoes, changing wet clothes, taking care of the children. Day after day, over the years she had spent her youth, the warmth of her blood, her glowing complexion, over so many things! She did not hold back anything for herself. No matter how hard you tried to dissuade her, she would work from dawn to midnight. Work, work, work. Only work.

And Natabar? Healthy body. A simple mind. Wherever he went he was not far from his household.

He reached the big open city ground. And what a crowd! As if half the population of the city had collected there. It was a forest of human heads on which one could roll. The collective spirit of the crowd almost submerged Natabar's individuality, his separate self. Buna's mother flew away, his household vanished like magic. The crowd was ahead of him and his own mind played a tune with it. Like a lost lonely lamb coming back to its fold, Natabar almost skipped the small space that lay between him and the crowd.

A keenly contested football match was going on between Baripada and Jeypore. Where were those places? Nobody had yet scored a goal. A goal? What did that mean? He began learning there on the spot. The red shirts and the green shirts. The play was in full swing. All the running and tension spread over the field.

In the finest moments Natabar felt dispirited. In his wisdom he judged: what a big waste of effort on such triviality! Twenty-two young fellows sweating and running about, just trying out their superiority on an inflated leather ball! And this is why their parents wasted money on them, to kick at balls!

Twenty-two young fellows. Together they could have dug up earth and prepared it for a mud-thatch house. And if they could take up the plough, each one of them, this lush green field could be ploughed up in no time and smiling crops could grow. Instead, all this force, this strange whim of city people. They would not eat well but smoke away their money in cigarettes. And this. Where were Baripada and Jeypore?

The interval was nearing. There was a thunderous, deafening roar. Baripada has scored a goal. Jeypore was trying with all its life to come on a par with it. There, they were going ahead. Jeypore players—group by group—advancing, taking positions, shooting. They were nearing the Baripada goal-post. The tension increased, the ceaseless fight, the circular strategy. That Jeypore player with his flowing hair, snub rose, bony face and dark complexion—how he ran—like the wind! There, how he snatched away the ball; and then the shout, 'Look, Kondhia has taken the ball there! And now he is sure to hit it out. Come on, kick it, push it into the goal posts.'

Natabar was intoxicated with the spirit of the game. Surreptitiously, stealthily, a new awareness had taken hold of him. Was it really new? No, maybe it was that very old instinct, to snatch away, to capture, to hold, to defeat the enemy, to grid up one's loins and take all difficulties in one's stride, to achieve one's objective. Not very different from a farmer or from Buna's mother, or village litigations, and warring factions. Litigations carried on for three whole years, the wanton destruction of crops and houses just to avenge some insult. And that was what it was, self-assertion, with the strength of the group. 'Come on, kick it, kick it hard.'

Without his knowing it, Natabar had identified himself with the Jeypore team; he had himself become that tall dark player from the Jeypore side. Maybe he was a stranger, but his success was Natabar's success now and it was the cry of his soul; 'Come on, kick, a goal, kick.' Natabar had pushed himself forward, elbowing his way towards the frontline of the crowd.

Despite all the shouting no goal could be scored; somebody was walking away dejectedly. Natabar drew back, unhappy that Jeypore could not make it.

The interval was over in seconds. After soda and lemon water the heroes were once again ready for a battle. There was a change of sides. Natabar prayed to God for the success of the Jeypore team. Jeypore kept pressing against the other side. There, the ball was moving fast in the direction of Baripada's goal-posts. And now, the goal, the goal!

Natabar was dancing and romping around, his umbrella unfurled. Many others were doing the same. The crowd was a thunderous roar; tension, arguments, shouting, jubilation. Some for Jeypore, others for Baripada. Some shouted, 'Up, Up, Baripada!' Others cried, 'Down, Down'! The play was now rising to a crescendo. Both sides were alert and intense. Sometimes one side drove past the centre line; sometimes the other side. That dark tall Jeypore player was racing along with the ball. Natabar shouted, 'Up, Up, Jeypore'! Somebody was shouting, 'Down, Down, the horse: Up Baripada!' Somebody also was shouting, 'There goes the horse, the horse!' Natabar felt hurt. He turned around and asked, 'Whom did you call the horse?'

'Why, that one with the flowing hair. Hold on, there goes the horse!'

'Mind your words, I say.'

'Why? Is it because you are the elder brother of the horse, the elephant?'

'You fellow, you are only a camel—'

'And you? You are an ass with those huge ears.'

Almost without thinking, Natabar had slapped him hard across the face with his left hand. He was a thin, bony man with protruding teeth, a tuft of beard, with spectacles and a cap on his head. Some blood oozed out of the corner of his mouth, the glasses were askew. The man cried in agony, 'I am killed. I am finished!' In no time a

group had gathered, shouting, 'Beat him, give him a thrashing!' Some other opposed them. In the twinkling of an eye there was a regular riot. Slaps, fists, sticks, a rain of stones, pulling and pushing, thunderous noise and shouts. Somebody was beating up somebody else—he had no time to see whom. Somebody struck him on the back while he was trying to pacify the people. And in that choking crowd, children were crying. Some others were running away. The police rushed on the scene: 'Away, clear away, away!'

The crowd was fanning out. Natabar examined himself. Had he been injured? Was blood oozing from his head? The police *lathi* had hit him; there was a slight injury.

But the war had ended. Along the field the serpentine road extended towards highlands. Baripada had scored again. A deep roar was heard, 'Goal; up Baripada!'

Natabar felt no heat in his mind any longer. He was returning to his friend's house quite cool.

Only half of the ball had stuck in his mind. The optimistic, rustic Natabar was explaining to himself: 'What a bad stroke of luck I had, but how lightly I got away! What would Buna's mother say when she heard about this?'

Returning Home

SINCE morning the sky was clouded and the sun was in hiding. In the pale light it was difficult to guess the time of the day. What lay ahead was a stretch of empty time. The road wended away far along which people came up and then receded. There was motion, a movement into oblivion, into the past. What then was the 'present'? Was it only a fluid shadow shifting across the memories of the past? Viswamurthy Babu heaved a sigh and remembered he would retire from his job after another seven months, on completing fifty-eight years of age, on the eighteenth of February.

He woke up to his loneliness sitting inside the car, his masks of different times falling off, many knots unwinding. He felt he was becoming a breath of his thoughts which kept flying.

But there was another person in the car. Driver Hussain at the steering, with his Khaki dress and his eyes glued to the road.

A quiet soul, he never opened his lips unless asked a question. It seemed he was simply not there and yet the car found the right direction on its own and kept running.

Viswamurthy Babu sat quiet on the left part of the back seat close to the door. His tall, dark healthy body now only retained its frame. His large face was slightly bony and angular; his wide and broad forehead looked broader because of his receding grey hairline and he put on eye glasses with thick frame. The determined face and the serious demeanour indicated strong confidence but one could never guess the thoughts that passed behind it. Maybe the expression on his face was also a mask, like his dress. It was a habit cultivated over many years which made one believe that the public and the private were worlds apart and one should not pry into the other across the

dark screen. And people knew him by his symbols, his known gestures and a style all his own. He was also known as an officer shouldering heavy burdens, in charge of many subjects who had discharged well his various responsibilities at different periods of time. All this was a part of the records of the establishment and they would be there till they are reduced to garbage in some record room. There was, of course, the further possibility of rats and ants making short shrifts of them.

Many people knew him at different phases of his career. Some might remember a few stories he had confided to them but some of them may no longer be there. After all birth and dissolution were the laws of the world. He exemplified them himself. He finished his tour, took his food and left Rourkela dak bungalow by car at eleven thirty-five, going back to Bhubaneswar via Keonjhar. Even if the cloudy day prevented a correct guess of time his tiny wrist watch still ticked away and it was just past one in the afternoon. The seconds rushed along into the past. Once upon a time the area he drove through was full of dense impassable jungles and hills and there was not even a footpath through it. Slowly there came up tiny patches of habitations: with men and their joys and sorrows, their cultures, creating, fabricating, producing, destroying. Who knows, hundreds or thousands of years might have rolled by thereafter. The earth and the soil again became impassable jungles and once again there were patches of cultivation on the hill-slopes shorn clean by slash and burn methods. Then came the roads and the bridges; the forests opened up. And all those deaths, the injustices, the deprivations, the cruelty and violence, the cry of the innocents and the victimised, their invocations to unseen forces for help, their weak endeavours in self-defence—all those were hidden behind this loneliness. As in a slope stones lay next to stones or as the trees nudged at one another in a dense jungle, they were part of an enormous group but each one was unique, different. The roots were entwined deep in the soil and when the earth shook they all felt the tremor. Viswamurthy Babu read newspapers like millions of others and knew of the fears of the apocalypse, of dreadful weapons of mass murder, of cruelty, oppression, droughts, deaths, children sold away to appease hunger, people

dying of starvation and eating the pickings from garbage, millions mutilated and the homeless taking to the roads. And yet dreams and hopes always dawned afresh only to evaporate like a light shower on a desert.

But he only used to glance through the news; seeking to build some bridge between his own self and the others. For that, after all, was life, a snail inside its shell, only occasionally sticking its neck out and then hurriedly withdrawing.

Viswamurthy Babu thought of the eighteenth of February when he would retire. Anyway, he had a house, both his sons were on their feet and were married. His two daughters too had been given away in marriage and lived comfortably. He had no debt to repay and he would receive his pension. There was enough to live by. And yet it would be a farewell to thirty-two years of habits and life-style; almost a new birth. That made him think it could be the end of the road, and perhaps of some bad dream. He felt a sensation inside, a soft wavering of the mind.

He could recall the figure of his primary school teacher Sribatsa Padhi; tall, fair-complexioned, heavily built, his tummy coming out, his flickering eyes and a suppressed smile on the lips. It seemed only yesterday when he told his father Dukhishyam—perhaps out of a sense of compassion looking at his innocent face—'The boy seems intelligent; please give him some education; he would do well. What did you say you have named him? Bauribandhu? No it does not sound nice. Let us call him Viswamurthy. Do you know whose name is that? He is our school Inspector, very learned. My young boy, you should be like him when you grow up.'

He had also advised back-dating his date of birth by two years, saying it would be useful in securing a job. But for that he would, by now, have been retired for one and half years.

Sribatsa Padhi was one of his well-wishers. He was no more. Towards the end of his life he suffered a lot. In his old age and retirement he was in utter poverty. His daughter became a widow. He lay bed-ridden and died. The two useless sons roamed around without doing anything and finally left the village. The old man used to perform *puja* and rituals sometimes in the neighbouring houses.

Occasionally he also taught small children. With that meagre earning he also taught small children. With that meagre earning he somehow managed, sometimes with a little to eat, sometimes starving. Years ago Viswamurthy Babu had gone home after obtaining his Master's degree, and had visited him. The emaciated old man sported an enormous smile on his sunken cheeks and in his toothless mouth as he caressed and blessed the visitor. 'I have heard of your success. I always obtained all the good news about you. And now I feel so happy that my thoughts about you when you were a child have proved true. And let me tell you, you will go much further and get a big job and become a great boss and earn great reputation.'

Four years later he was no more. But could Viswamurthy Babu ever do anything for him? Could he even have kept up any intimacy with him? Viswamurthy Babu felt a stirring of repentance inside. But to console his mind he argued: 'But there were so many teachers and he was not the only one. Besides they were paid to teach. It was true some were loving and informal while others merely performed a duty. But where was the need for any further recompense?' But his mind could not rest content, the argument faded away and a deep repentance cast its shadow on it. . . . 'I have failed in my duty. I can never again rectify it,' he told himself.

Darkness was gathering but the day had not ended. Light was fading. And they had left behind, as the car raced on through scattered villages and fields of crop, hillocks and plain land. And in the gathering haze herds of cattle, goats and human beings had also passed by. Suddenly he felt that only the open mouth of a dark loneliness was before him and he was rapidly racing into it.

Along with the memory of Sribatsa Padhi many others also came crowding into the mind, different persons right from his childhood days in the village, some who loved him, helped him in various ways, some who had faith in him, confidence in him and he had felt that their love would last forever and they were his unselfish, intimate well-wishers. For a time they had become his very own and then the relationship had snapped. No one knew where they got lost. If accidentally he met someone sometime, the person looked very different. Or may be he had himself become different. A stone by the side of another stone, irrelevant to each other. Sometimes he felt that they

never had any significance for him. This world was full of men. How did one care for another if it was not for some selfish purpose?

But in that lonely deepening dark he remembered many faces from the past. Suddenly he felt his mind perturbed by a feeling of guilt and repentance that he was perhaps ungrateful, that he could not repay the gifts of others. For after all, no one can stand alone in life. Like a tree growing out of a seed a man depended on so many in such diverse ways as he coursed through life. Sometimes it could be encouragement, sometimes hope, assurance and so on. How else could one really survive? He felt his rigidity melting away and giving place to compassion.

Those remembered faces were appearing and disappearing, leaving only a sense of pity and silence behind. He was now getting over his selfishness and emotionally floating away towards others now lost to him. He had lived through deprivation, diffidence, lack of hope but in adolescence he developed a confidence that he would grow and stand up not only for himself but for all the others whose tragedy he had felt inside his bones.

After that so many years had passed. He had seen so many pictures of poverty, misfortune and despair. It made him feel that it was an unchanging scenario over the time. He questioned himself what he had done for others. Had he shared his good fortune with others? Maybe he had waxed eloquent with grand theories, perhaps had dreamt big dreams and derived futile satisfaction from supposed achievements. Maybe sometimes he had consoled himself that after all one could do only a little and in any case it was also for others to act.

He woke up to a sudden thud and the car came to a halt. The driver shouted, 'You brother-in-law of a boy, wait, I am going to give you a thrashing.'

'What was it, Hussain?' he asked. 'A rogue of a boy threw a stone at the car and ran away. Let me see what has happened.' He got down from the car. It was at a cross-road in Dhenkanal town. The time was seven in the evening. There were people in the streets. The car had got a dent. The driver kept shouting but no one could say who or where was the boy who did it. He decided that back home the car must be repaired. He asked the driver whether he would like to

have a cup of tea or they could go. He observed that now a days boys were very mischievous. Anyway it was a time of confusion and the youngsters learnt their lessons from the elders.

With a start he recalled how as a child he had thought of pelting stones at passing cars himself, particularly when, during the rains, they splashed muddy water on his clothes as they speed past him. But the next moment that thought had vanished and in anger he told himself how bad the times were with goondaism, chaos and disorder everywhere and a complete loss of decorum and good manners.

Hussain came back quickly after tea and they were again on the road. Viswamurthy Babu returned to the thought of his impending retirement. Who knows, he may perhaps get some offer somewhere thereafter. He was still hale and hearty and would like to do something, he convinced himself.

The Solution

DADHIBAMAN was back home from office after a full day's work. He felt tired, hot and worried as he stood in the backyard looking vacantly at the distant horizon and brooding over the affairs of the day. He remembered that he had seen the sunrise in the morning, he had hurried through his daily chores and had been at his desk punctually at ten and now, the day was almost over and barely an hour of sunlight was left.

It had been, as usual, a busy day for him in the office, with the same strain on his nerves, and with the same boredom which had haunted him for hours after he returned home from his office day after day. He had been in his chair for hours on end and working continuously without a moment's respite. His muscles ached and there was a confused din in his head.

He reflected on how his life was being sucked dry in that office and being completely wasted. Years had gone by, but his lot had never improved. He had put in long hours at his work, and had worked daily on loads of files, but the more files he had disposed of, the more arrived on his table from his boss. It had been the same every day. He had the feeling that his output was many times more than the equivalent of his poor salary of Rs 120 a month. And yet, he had never received a word of appreciation from his boss. On the other hand, his boss gave him a tongue-lashing every now and then, found fault with his work, questioned his ability and even his suitability for the job he held. Often, his boss administered a hard rebuke to him in contemptuous and provocative language. At times, he would go a step further, he would pass on a note to him calling for his written explanation and conveying a veiled threat that should his explanation fail to satisfy him, he would be sacked.

As he reminded himself of his daily plight, Dadhibaman felt disconsolate and desperate. His face flashed. His breath grew hot. He thought that he was no better than a slave and his boss was a slave-driver. He felt that he could not bear to be in his shackles a moment longer than he could help. But he found no alternative. Without that job he would be undone. After all, he had to maintain himself and his family.

He brooded over his wretched pay. Prices of commodities had soared high and were ten times more than what they had been ten years earlier, and his whole pay amounted to the value of only three bags of rice. A bag of rice was needed for the monthly consumption of his family and with the price of only two more bags of rice he had to buy all other items of food, clothes, fuel and the rest of the necessaries, to pay the rent for the house and to pay for water, electricity, etc. Fuel alone cost fifteen rupees a month and the laundryman charged eight rupees. Then there were the occasional bills sent by the family doctor and sundry expenses. It was next to impossible for him to make both ends meet and balancing of the family budget was a continuous nightmare.

Still he struggled on, cutting down drastically on whatever of his needs he could, and leading a stark, austere, beggarly existence. He perhaps fared the poorest; milk and butter were beyond his dreams. Whenever he was at home, he remained indoors wrapped in tattered, worn-out sheets which he wound round his body in at least two-folds in order to hide the gaping holes. He experimented with many other measures of economy, but they were of no avail. He was always in want.

He cursed his bondage of fifteen years to his job which had never brought him a square meal. His debts and his worries had piled up, his work in office had increased and grown more exacting and his boss had never had a kind word for him. It was a bleak and barren future that lay before him. He could foresee no change. As he brooded over his fate, standing under a lonely *sahada* tree, he was filled with despair.

Suddenly, he felt a tug at the hem of the sheet in which he had been wrapped. There was a sound of some creature crying 'Mein!

Mein!' He woke up with a start, looked down and saw his pet goat emitting happy bleats of welcome.

'Mein! Mein!' cried the goat. It meant nothing in Oriya, his native language, though in Hindi and Urdu it did have a sense, it meant 'I'. The year-old full-grown buck which he had fondly named 'Betu', meaning 'My son', was sporting a fine beard and it looked confident. As if it meant to convey: 'I am here, Don't worry.' He had brought it home while it had been a tiny kid so that his baby son would play with it.

His gloom disappeared as he looked with loving eyes at his pet. He sat down and stroked its back. His eyes softened at the touch of its hairy body and he drew in with pleasure its strong goaty odour. 'My Betu!, My Betu!' he called softly.

Betu shook its tail with pleasure, stood up on its hind legs, thrust its snout towards his face and gave out a few more happy bleats.

It then brought down its forelegs and trotted about gaily. It had a red collar round its neck studded with a string of tinkles which jingled as it frisked. The goat ran to him again, rubbed its back against his ankles and cried, 'Mein! Mein!'

Suddenly Dadhibaman thought that he should provide his Betu with a mate. That would fetch him some money in the course of time, for a she-goat would bring forth kids and as the kids would grow up he would sell them now and then for meat which, he knew, had grown costly. The thought of meat reminded him of roasted mutton and mutton curry and made his mouth watery. He sat down and stroked the back of his plump pet tenderly. His three little children came running to him followed by their mother. Betu jumped, its tinkles jingled and the children ran after it, shouting 'Betu! O Betu!' They had some fun with the goat for a short while and then their mother led them indoors.

Dadhibaman stood up and looked at them as they disappeared. A mood of gloom and despair had again descended upon him. He did not move. He was thinking of his poor salary and was comparing his income with that of illiterate labourers, pedlars, hawkers and even of urchins sitting on the pavements polishing shoes. They earned much more than him. He called to mind how a rickshaw-puller

earned more than ten rupees a day, a labourer who carried head-loads of bricks or sand over a short distance earned five rupees a day and how a pan vendor sitting in a small wayside wood cabin could earn enough to own a building of his own in a few years. He remembered Feda Mian, an illiterate with hardly any savings or resources who had begun life as a petty bicycle-repairer twelve years ago, and had done so well at it that he already owned four buildings in the town and was doing business as a moneylender.

'Why could not I do as much?' he thought bitterly. He knew the answer. He had his family to think of and he could not afford to leave his job before he had found some other means of maintaining it and whenever he had thought of taking to some other trade he had been dampened by the thought that it would take at least two years before a new trade could stand on its legs and yield a monthly income that would at least be as much as his monthly salary. There was no way out of his bondage and the thought made him disconsolate.

What was rankling in his mind and was driving him to desperation was an unsavoury experience that he had in his office that very day. His boss had stormed wildly at him. His shouts of anger and the vituperations he had hurled against him were still ringing in his ears and were setting his blood on fire. He was cursing his boss to his heart's content. 'The fellow is a monster!' he thought, 'An ill-bred cur with no sense of decency at all.' What worried him most, however, was that his boss had also handed over a note to him containing an order demanding explanation for delay on a file and had meaningfully added the ominous threat that should his explanation be deemed to be unsatisfactory, punishment would surely follow, be it demotion or a cut in his salary, or even dismissal from service. His boss had not minced words and Dadhibaman had an uncanny feeling that the fellow would really carry out his threat if he failed to furnish a satisfactory explanation. He could not think out what he should write in self-defence because he believed that whatever reasons he would advance for the delay would fail to satisfy his boss. He thought that his boss would never accept his explanation, and what he believed to be the truth, that he was being heavily overworked, the load being more than what two men could cope up with, and that even the Creator Himself would make similar delays

and mistakes in such a situation. He also thought that his boss would never accept the extraneous reasons like the one that he thought should be borne out by any one who had experience of rearing up little children, that for some days past his children had been ailing and he could not enjoy undisturbed sleep at night as he was required every now and then to attend to their needs and consequently he had at times fallen asleep over his files while working in the office.

'Nobody wants to hear the truth,' he told himself ruefully. 'They want lies. But what false plea can I concoct?'

The prospect of losing his job haunted his thoughts and chilled his heart though he smarted from the indignities heaped on him by his angry boss. He could think of no plea which he would offer by way of explanation. He had pulled out the sinister note from his pocket, had smoothened out the crumpled paper and was reading it over and over again. And then he heard the familiar sound again, 'Mein!'.

He looked sadly at the goat's eyes. The goat swayed its head from side to side, shook its ears, rubbed its forehead against his knees and looked at his eyes expectantly. Dadhibaman envied the cheerfulness of the goat and by contrast, felt miserable. He was filled with self-pity and he imagined that he was the sole unhappy creature on earth.

Suddenly, the goat snatched away the note of his boss from his hand and before he could reach out for it, started chewing it up. The mass of skin covering its snout was curling up and opening out again and again. He made a bid to grab the note and shouted in alarm, 'Leave it, Betu! Let go!' but it was gone, and was well on its way into the goat's stomach.

Dadhibaman was shocked. 'I am done for!' he cried, 'What have you done! Foolish Betu! You swallowed that up!' He could not think how he could write out an explanation that would satisfy his irate and vindictive boss without that paper before him. His job was at stake, together with the livelihood of himself and his family.

He felt dizzy. He had read the nasty contents of that note so many times that the words had been imprinted on his memory, but now that the paper was lost beyond any chance of recovery, he found to his consternation that he could not recall a single word of its content. He had only a hazy recollection of its gist, a distasteful experience

of which his memory refused to yield the details. He remembered the expression on the face of his boss. He felt that he could not draft a cogent explanation without referring to the particulars that the note had contained. In fact he thought that every word in it held out some sinister allegation or insinuation which needed to be refuted by him and now he could do nothing about it. And facing his boss and asking him to write out another note for him was out of the question.

Something, however, happened to him during the movements that followed and his mood changed. A new look brightened up his eyes. 'I don't care', he said to himself defiantly. He stood up and looked at the goat's eyes. The goat looked at him steadily and its eyes were aglow with fire. Dadhibaman argued that his written explanation would never have mattered, however cleverly and ably it might have been drafted, for nothing that he would have said in self-defence would have satisfied his boss. He decided that he would furnish no explanation, come what may.

A storm raged in his mind as he went inside his house. Betu was at his heels. He went into his room. Betu followed him there. A heap of files lay on his table. He had brought them home so that he could work on them at night. He took out a file and held it before Betu. Betu wagged its tall. He made over the file to Betu who at once set to work munching it up with great gusto. Betu had tasted local dailies and waste papers thrown outside his house, but this seemed to taste much better. Betu stood up on its hind legs, leaned against its master and looked at his face. Dadhibaman understood what it wanted and made over another file to It for disposal.

His office was not far from where he lived. When the next day his office opened, the gate-keeper saw a strange sight. Dadhibaman entered the compound and was walking up the path leading to the office building, followed by a billy goat with a red collar studded with tinklets that jingled as it ambled.

'A goat has strayed into the grounds!' The gate-keeper shouted in alarm as he ran to drive it away 'Hey goat! Out, before I break your bones!' he shouted.

'Stop!' Dadhibaman told him firmly. 'It is my domestic pet and will do no harm. Come, Betu, keep close to me, don't look at the grass.' Betu obeyed.

'How strange!' the gate-keeper exclaimed. 'It seems to understand what you say and it obeys you! It must have been well-trained!'

'It is. Haven't you seen goats in a circus and how they dance when they are ordered to? This one is almost human. It understands what we speak.'

Betu marched on behind its master and soon made the acquaintance of everybody in the office.

Ram babu, a colleague of Dadhibaman admired its plump body. 'A fine goat,' he said. 'It would yield nearly sixteen pounds of the best and tasty meat.'

'But that would matter little,' another clerk Gopal babu interposed. 'It should have been castrated. The meat of a billy goat emits its foul body-odour that is repellent.'

'Mein?' Betu asked with a questioning glance.

'Don't worry,' another clerk, Isak Mian, said. 'There will be no such goaty odour if you will process the meat as I tell you. I know the art. But you must first do *halal* when you kill the goat.' He was a Muslim and it was the custom with a Muslim to slit the throat of an animal and to offer it to God before he can eat its meat.

The men discussed the various techniques of processing and cooking an uncastrated he-goat's meat by which its offensive odour could be eliminated. Then they went back to their seats.

Betu made a detour of the office-room, came back to Dadhibaman, rubbed his head against his legs and cried, 'Mein?' There was a waste-paper basket near Dhadhibaman's seat; he emptied its contents on the floor and Betu settled down, chewing those papers in a leisurely manner.

Work proceeded in full swing in the office as usual and the clerks were busily engaged in their files. Betu had swallowed up every bit of paper that Dadhibaman had spilled on the floor before it; it then moved round in a leisurely pace. Nobody paid attention to it. There was an open rack near each seat in which files had been stacked. Betu would draw out a file from a rack as it strolled by and them would start chewing it up. Unlike the clerks, disposal of files by Betu was quick and thorough; nothing remained for any action in future. It would finish eight or ten files at a stretch, take some rest and then move on to the file-rack of someone else. It went to the seat of the

Head Clerk. There were stacks of files in his rack that bore red labels reading 'Urgent!' The Head Clerk had been called away by the boss. Betu disposed of a number of files and came back. It had lightened the load of the Head Clerk and had left some excellent manure for him.

'Betu!' Dadhibaman called. Betu ran to him, its tinkles jingling. 'Now lie down here', Dadhibaman commanded, and the goat lay down near his feet. Dadhibaman held its neck pressed between his legs and went on working.

The Head Clerk came back from his boss in a huff.

'Look here, all of you!' he cried from his seat in anger, 'You have been delaying disposal of files and the boss vents his anger on me for no fault of mine. I am not going to shield anyone of you anymore. I shall report each defaulter to the boss. Before I do that, I want a straight answer from you. Are you going to dispose of the files promptly or not? Let me hear from you first, Dadhibaman Babu!'

'I don't have any file pending, sir. I have disposed of all arrears.' Dadhi Babu said.

'Now, that is a news! is that true?'

'You can come and see for yourself, sir, I have no arrears.'

'That is very good.'

The goat shook itself from the grip of Dhadhibaman's legs and stood up and bleated, 'Mein! Mein!' The Head Clerk's table was at the remote end of the room and he had been away when it first entered and hence had not noticed its presence. 'How could a goat come inside the office?' He shouted, 'What has happened to the gate-keeper?'

'That is my goat, sir', Dadhibaman hastened to reply. 'It does no harm. It is a pet and is very well-behaved. It took it into its heed to follow me here and had been lying down quietly near me all the time. You may rest assured, sir, it will do no mischief, nor will it wet the floor. It is well-trained. Let it be with me, sir. And you know what the doctors say about the body odour of a he-goat, sir? It kills the germs that cause pthisis. This dark and stuffy room in which all of us have been huddled together for want of accommodation is, as you know, just the type of place that breeds pthisis.

The Head Clerk was in no mood to listen to Dhadhibaman's talk

on pthisis. He was looking at the goat appreciatively. 'A fine goat,' he said, 'it can easily yield more than ten pounds of excellent meat. But why didn't you get it castrated?'

It advanced resolutely towards the file-rack of the Head Clerk where there were many more files labelled 'Urgent'. It had remembered that it had work to do there.

The Bird

IT was the beginning of the month of Baisakh. Half past three in the afternoon. Even the waning sun was furiously burning. Two Krishnachura trees on the left bent under the weight of their brick-colour flowers with patches of tender leaves. To the right the bougainvillaeas of various shades of red also seemed to be burning.

Shankar Misra looked at them absent-mindedly and felt as if everything was on fire. Oh, what a horror!

Suddenly he remembered the bird. Where was it? As soon as he remembered it he felt as if the fierce sun went under clouds, a gentle cool breeze touched him and the murmuring of hill-streams could be heard. On the light green canopy of the trees bunches of red flowers were hanging. Some bright red creepers were there just below the swing of a *paiash* tree and that little bird kept fleeting there. It had a red beak, its body was a polished emerald blue and when it flew, there was a sparkle of black. In a moment it got lost, reappeared, and once again was lost.

That was its colour in this season.

During the rainy season when there was an intermission in the downpour, suddenly one would encounter it: a tiny flying rainbow. In the pale light of the winter its body acquired the colour of the bright red *kaincha* fruit.

Its every appearance excited his curiosity, inspired in him a sense of wonder and joy. It would never sit down or produce a sound. It would only flit from one side to another and then vanish. But after that Shankar Misra felt, for a long time, as if he was in a different world, with a new life and a new experience when all was joy. That strange experience would keep him obsessed for a few days when a

realisation constantly nudged at him that the world around and all his sense-perceptions were perhaps unreal, that he was only dreaming and the workaday life was a mere illusion.

After a few days those questions and those doubts would melt and life would go on as before. But when some problems, anxieties or unhappiness invaded him, a measure of hopelessness overpowered or dark clouds from all directions seemed to threaten the last flicker of light, suddenly hope and faith revived. He felt that somehow those problems would disappear. Hidden somewhere inside would be the feeling that the wonderful bird would once again appear and that would be another space, another time.

And, indeed a glimpse of the bird would be caught somewhere.

Shankar Misra looked back into the past and tried to remember where all he had seen that beautiful bird and how many times. For it was no ordinary bird and was not sighted everywhere. It could be seen only in the isolation of the vast jungles or sometimes, as if by mistake, it strayed into some mango groves or a forest. Even that was rare and once sighted it would disappear in no time. But it was seen only when all was quiet and lonely and no other animal or bird was around.

But when had he last sighted it? Shankar Misra tried hard to recall. He was now seventy-three. Once stout, hale and hearty, his body was now weak and emaciated with the attack of diseases. His mind, once capable of comprehending and analysing issues and problems now fought shy of taking such pains. Even a little cerebration exhausted him and even his personal experience eluded his memory. 'Was it like that?' he sometimes wondered and corrected himself, saying, 'Oh no, it was the other way round.' Then he gave up and remained submerged in a state of dream and reverie.

He continued in his reverie on the bird—and tried to recollect when he had seen it and in what circumstance. It was a thought on which he leaned desperately. He remembered one place after another, one passing scene after another and always the bird kept flying ahead like a pole star. He could recollect several scenes of his life. He could recall the memories of happiness, pain and myriad other experiences. As if on an endless expanse of water there were waves, rising, falling and subsiding. There was the music of many voices, of emotions and

rasas; it rose to a crescendo and again fell silent. And as he kept thinking as to where he had seen the bird, hopes and emotions sprouted and brought the memories of other days. With that Shankar Misra could perceive the various states of his life from youth to old age, but through all these stages he had seen that bird again and again.

He remembered having seen it for the first time in his early youth. With that he got strength in the body, good health, dark energy rising inside like the tides on the sea at Puri he had seen in his childhood. The body had vigour, it was active, it exuded courage, happiness, hopes and dreams. That way he passed his life, afraid of none, bowing to no obstacle, working tirelessly, his hopes and faith fully intact. He was not aware when the ebb came and water receded level by level. At that time too he had seen the bird.

When a sudden flood in a hill-stream subsided, it left behind, skirting stones and sands, a thin stream of water. Likewise, he thought, his body in this hour of tired sunset was only bones and skin, almost lifeless, as if surviving only to eat a little and suffer sickness and inabilities. Even now the tongue recognised good taste and craved for it. Shankar Misra asked himself, 'Who is this creature full of such desires?'

And he wondered if he was really Shankar Misra. Not once a smile bloomed on his face. He tried to recall for how long he had not laughed. And there was a time when he roared out his laughter. Now there was no zeal for anything, only a tendency to withdraw from everybody and pass time all alone wallowing in his own unhappiness, feeling all the while that one was only a lonely, helpless old man. And sometimes he told himself, 'No, no, this could not be Shankar Misra; it was some other old man; Shankar Misra was never at this address. Go away, memory, please go away.'

When did he see that bird for the last time? It seemed only yesterday, but already seven years had passed. While going to Nilamadhav temple they had stopped over for a while in the Nayagarh jungle. His car parked near the dak-bungalow, he had strolled into the forest. It was around four in the afternoon and he saw the bird. Surely it did not belong there and must have flown across from the

Baliguda hills via Daspalla jungles. Its home was in those high mountains to the north and the south.

In a flash he made up his mind. He must go once again to those mountains. The exploration of the hills for valuable minerals that he had begun was far from complete. He would go again and encounter, once again, the bird in the lonely dense jungle and he would stand silent and still under a sal tree just looking at it.

He recalled how wild elephants sometimes stopped immobile. He thought he would stand on hill-slopes likewise and allow the cool mountain breeze to wipe away the sweat. There would be heady fragrance of nameless forest flowers. And the companions? Tired, they would have fallen far behind him, for no one had ever been able to keep pace with him.

And he looked ahead. There were waves of mountains arranged like *Vimanas.* He felt the warmth of an exhilaration inside.

Old Shankar Misra dozed off in his chair in the front verandah of his house, his mouth agape and his head resting on the wall.

Drowning

No longer he remembered how and what all happened. Maybe only the psychiatrists could say. But he could comprehend the situation very clearly. A small, frail boat, no oars, no staff and mast, no other person, not even a tiny rat. He was floating on the sea. Alone.

The day seemed to boil over. A blazing sun, the quiet sky, the blue sea, the blue-green huge oily waves that kept rolling and made the boat dance and play as a cat made a mouse play. He knew, he could see his future. Looking at the sea his eyes met the eyes of the sea. Eyes full of mischief, fun, violence and ridicule. When she would pounce upon him he did not know. But he would be snatched away. Was this a contraption to kill rats? No, even worse than that; the axe had been raised and was to fall any moment on his neck. As though he was the *meria*, the man to be sacrificed according to the ancient rite. The worship was over. All the royal treatment given to the victim was over. He was the recipient of many gestures of affection. Everybody was eager to make him happy. So much music, so much convivial gathering, offerings, flowers. Now it was another time. A post-script. Everyone was silent, but anxious. Eyes burning and violent, all the knives raised and trembling in excitement like the blue waves. The *disari* (priest) would give the first stab and then everybody else would fall upon the victim in impatient confusion. That moment was approaching.

During the brief interlude he tried to think intensely how all this came about. No answer was forthcoming. But surely the answer lay hidden, he felt, somewhere in the centre of his consciousness though not found by him. The more the present circumstances pressed him down, the more he felt as though he was born in this very condition

and grew up on the sea, in this lonely boat and no other person was ever there, nobody else.

Yet he could remember other times; had dim recollections of objects in a dream. A big ship, many persons, friends, relatives, many faces, many intimacies. Yet no remembrance of relationships or whereabouts. As though something had exploded somewhere within him and he could remember nothing. As though this life was some other life in another time. Maybe some other life in the past. Only some memories of that life now came floating and yet doubts persisted whether there was such a past life at all. Maybe everybody leaped out of nature. Only a moment ago, he himself, a lonely man and this boat had emerged from the sea and the sea would swallow both again. He felt like crying with all his might. A strong desire to do that shook him for a moment. Then he looked again in all directions. The sea, only the sea, waves mounting on waves, the empty sky. None to hear his cry, none to console him. He could not cry. His face remained fixed in a grimace. And there was no mirror to see how it looked.

Looking at the fearful waves, he felt he was praying to God for a very long time, in a nightmarish fear. When a huge wave broke, a feeling grew that the boat would capsize. But it rode the waves and went on bouncing up and down. Something in his heart grew, withered and died. He kept on crying and suddenly felt he had heard him. He was very near, within his own self and he kept hearing a silent voice, 'Why this resistance, to what use? I have ordained this. I am taking away and I will be by your side. Only a little ahead, only a little more to go. Who other than me lasts forever?'

No longer he writhed in pain. No longer he thought. Only the distant look, as though in a trance, was all that remained. As though there would no longer be any batting of the eyelids. The waves grew brighter and bigger every moment and were breaking on one another. Unperturbed, the man kept on sitting there, tightly holding the sides of the boat.

And when the boat went down under the mountain of a wave, he was still sitting in that post.

Road Closed

WINTER in the metropolis. The human spate made of 10'o clock office-goers along the street that looked like a river, overflowed with pedestrians and vehicles. Hurried, impatient, deafening sounds. Swirling, milling crowds. Four streams of automobiles, tram-cars surging from behind and you would feel the whole thing was going to break-down, come to a dead stop. But the current moved on. Everything passed, renewed.

With unsteady steps he emerged from a by-lane opening to the street. Two bottles of wine in two hands. A young man with a lean, unshaven face. A loose pyjama and a kurta, dense, flowing long hair on the head, he stood in the middle of the road, lifted a bottle in his right hand towards the sun and shouted, 'I, Sridam Sen enjoin: this road is now closed.' And then raising the two bottles in both his hands, he added, 'Beware! The road is closed. Whoever moves forward dies!'

A drunkard creating a scene on the road. In the metropolis of eight million souls, he was by no means the only one of that type. Nor was this the first time that a drunkard made such a scene. Nobody stopped for it, nobody bothered about it. There were, after all, appropriate laws to take care of such fellows.

But the moment Sridam Sen issued his *firman*, something strange and mysterious seemed to happen. On either side of him vehicles and men came to a dead stop. People started talking to one another in whispers, as if, in a nightmare. Such a vast city and so many people and in this crowd itself there must be so many brave and courageous souls! But, as if, some all-pervading, if unpronounced, law, some

inexpressible sense of fear and embarrassment seized everybody and kept them on check. Nobody took a step forward.

As if he was not mere Sridam Sen! As if he was some unknown saint and the surging *bhakti* of his known devotees had spread to the crowd, had infected them, had assumed many shapes and had grown to enormous proportions creating wonder and fear. This man could make everything possible. There was no need for any further questions.

As if, he was himself a pack of ferocious explosive that could destroy thousands. The crowd had come to an absolute standstill. Sridam Sen continued drinking, unsteady on his feet and, in front of him and behind, up to a distance of six cubits, there was nobody. Only empty space. Silently the metropolis was offering its ovation to Sridam Sen. At least a few knew who he was! And in the small by-lanes adjoining the street his unidentified battalion lay in wait at different places. In street corners, shops, by the side of the foot-paths, in so many places and in so many costumes they were there. As if, they were the *Jivan danis*; they were prepared to sacrifice their lives any moment. And they were ever prepared to break, to burn, to assault. Knives, bombs, arson, scuffles and looting. All manners and styles of use of force They were experts. It was their sweet will that moved everything.

Sridam Sen was their *sardar*, *guru*, leader. It was rarely that he emerged on the street in a drunken condition or made a scene. His disciples must be thinking that he had some special reason for making this scene today. They looked upon him as a god. Guided by his advice they not merely reaped profits, they also grew fearless and their respect and image in the public eye also rose in proportion. When Virata would be king they would be his Kichakas. When everybody, in fear trembling, would pray earnestly *Dwisam Jahi, Dwisam Jahi* ('kill the enemy') they would assure, whomsoever they wanted to put on the throne of Virata: 'Don't be afraid, we are behind you.' And Sridam Sen honoured so many important people by his visits. He was somebody's brother, someone's friend and someone's colleague. Similar to the ancient practice of a ruler collecting *Chauth*, Sridam Sen also collected some 'security fee' from the

businessmen. Besides, there were festivals and religious functions round the year. There were so many institutional celebrations. Contributions fixed by him for all those occasions had to be paid. If on this street Dusserah could be celebrated in a big way for full seven days amidst milling crowds, sparkling lights, operas and music, everybody knew that it was Sridam Sen who arranged all that. Sridam had fixed ten thousand rupees to be paid as contribution by the large cloth-shop at the end of the street. The shop-keeper tried to get away paying a lesser sum, with the help of the local people. Sridam revised the amount and made it twenty thousand. There was no more argument. Twenty thousand had to be paid. This and many similar stories were passing from ear to ear.

Sridam Sen suddenly got ready for his speech. He looked once to the right and once to the left and started: 'I only wanted to see whether or not you are observing discipline. Whose is the responsibility, you think? First, no doubt, it is mine. But it is also yours. If discipline is not observed, everything will go amiss. I am glad you are observing discipline. Do keep it up. Don't forget. Now all of you can go, otherwise you may be late for the office.'

The crowd resumed flowing on the old streets. But Sridam Sen was not there.

Identity

IT was a village in a remote corner in Orissa, situated in a terrain dotted with swamps and cut through by a net-work of creeks. It was the low-lying sea-coast washed by floods every year which gave the tract its popular name *Dhoya*, the 'flooded area'. An earthen road stretched ten miles from the village, intercepted by three rivers and a swamp. There was no other road nearby.

It was the day of polling for election to the State Legislature as well as to the Parliament. One of the many polling booths in the State had been located in that village. Voters of several villages were to cast their votes there that day.

One such voter was Pemi's mother. As the day dawned, she got down from her bed and went through her routine ablutions. There was a small fish-pond close by. She went there, took a dip and hurried through her bath over which, on other days, she used to spend quite some time. She returned home, changed and hung up the wet *Sari* from the eaves of the thatched roof so that it would dry up early. There it hung looking like a curtain. Her house had mud walls and mud floor. She sat down on the bare floor in the adjacent room near an open door where there was some light and opened a casket of reeds. She took out of it a tiny packet; it contained a handful of sundry crumbs of cooked rice taken out of the cooked food that had been offered to Lord Jagannath in the temple at Puri and then dried in the sun. The rice thus had been sanctified. She put a particle of the sacred dried rice in her mouth, touched her forehead with her folded palms and made a deep bow with a silent prayer to God.

Her second holy act after bath every morning was to put a round vermilion mark in the middle of her forehead. The mark signified that her husband was alive; it was intended not only to announce

that fact to the world, but also to ensure a long life, happiness and prosperity for her husband. Vermilion powder had been kept for her use inside a tiny wooden box in her casket. She took out the box, opened the lid, which was shaped like a dome and dipped a finger in it. Then, while she held her mirror before her face, she raised her finger tipped with vermilion to the forehead and pressed her fingertip in the middle of the forehead leaving a round red dot there. It was like a red sun rising out of a misty background.

A smiling face greeted her from the mirror. It was the face of a woman of forty-five who had lived in a village all her life. It had nothing extraordinary about it and was one of the common faces that one saw everywhere in the villages. It was the face of any one of a large mass of people who lived in want, went through much physical strain, bore children and brought them up, and while letting their personal interests suffer, busied themselves all their lives serving the needs of others in the family. They observed all the canons laid down by the society and yet walked with guarded steps lest any one should speak ill of them. As could be observed in every home, such a life left its mark on their faces, making all of them fall into the same pattern, like fruit of the same tree, except for slight variations in their appearances. There was a common expression on all such faces and it was similar to what one would expect to see on the faces of two women, one fair-complexioned and the other brown, after they had suffered simultaneously from a persistent headache for a full month.

The face that Pemi's mother could see in the mirror did not look like a full face; it was more like a slice of a face. It was narrow and long, like a piece of a ripe pumpkin. The cheeks were thin, dry, withered and long. They were two thin slices with a narrow apace of two inches; in between them were the upper jaw arched out beyond the lower while, like a tumbling roof leaning on loosened and weather-beaten rafters, the upper lip rested on three jutting teeth that stuck out of the upper jaw and an inch and a half of them lay exposed.

The eyes that looked at her from the mirror were soft and timid. Even a causal glance at them would convince a person that they had never flashed fire at any one, eyes that saw, suffered, bore the suffering as long as possible and then wept. A dark, bottomless, pool of water bound on all sides lay in them. Rarely had a ray of light

entered those unfathomable depths. The smile that lit the face was a forlorn one.

The head was almost bald and remnants of hair here and there were thin and scattered and had not stopped falling, but starting above the middle of the forehead and going all over like a red road across a flat rocky land covered with a thin scrub jungle, there was left a wide and clear mark of parting of hair. Once upon a time, when she had long, thick and glossy hair, she used to part it in the middle along that line while combing it for plaiting. The track was now lost in a fold of her ash-grey *sari* which covered the back of her head like an ever hanging cloud in the horizon at the end of a vanishing road. It was rimmed by the border of the *sari* which showed some blue flowers but the *sari* was old and had undergone frequent washings and the flowers had faded.

Pemi's mother remembered that it was the day of the voting. A strange feeling of power and confidence came over her as she thought of the significance of that day for her. She had been a nonentity all her life; she felt that she would no more be that, she could vote.

She mused on the fate of all women in the country. She had been one among many, all similarly placed. She had lived her life like a shadow. No one of the men-folk, not even little children, would concede a woman views of her own in any matter or her right to be consulted. The elders said, 'Don't listen to women, what they talk is only useless chatter.' Children said, 'Don't ask mother. What can she have to say?' Pemi's father said, 'Your forte as a woman consists of three things: cooking food, preparing pan and taking care of children. Concern yourself with these and that is enough for you. To what else can a woman contribute?'

The pity of it was that even the women shared the same opinion about themselves. They would gather at the bathing pond when there were festivals in the village, chat and express similar views. They believed that it was a woman's fate, as ordained by God, to suffer without protesting and that protests were of no avail. Illustrating the peculiar fate of being born a female, one of them would quote a well-known adage:

'A punch on the left cheek,
And you say Him!

A punch on the left cheek,
And you say Him!
And for whatever comes next,
You don't even protest.'

'And so,' she would continue, 'just as a burning wick is put out, a female should extinguish herself and meekly wait on her men-folks wherever they are.'

Pemi's mother also remembered how, whenever some people were selected by the villagers to adjudicate between two contesting parties, kinsmen or otherwise, a woman was never invited to sit on the panel of the judges.

Pemi's mother had accepted that inferior status all her life and taken good care never to express her opinion publicly. There had been occasions when some one had put a question to her face and had sought to know her views. She had found such situations embarrassing. She would then hide herself in the corner of the room that was next to the door, thrust the end of her *sari* into her mouth, bite it and draw lines with her finger-nails on the back of the door. Even then, lest some opinion might escape her lips in an unguarded moment, she would hide her tongue in the midst of her chewed *pan*.

And now she experienced a sense of freedom as never before. It would be all different on this momentous day, she thought, when she would go in public, with people looking on, and cast her vote in favour of any of the candidates she wished. She had her free opinion and it was valued and counted and it mattered.

She knew that three groups of people were contesting the elections. Representatives of each party had come to her village, had canvassed for votes, had sung the praise of their own party and vilified the other two accusing them of various misdeeds. Two such parties, while indulging in mutual vilification, had clashed on the village road. Close on the heels of exchange of foul words, and abuse, there came also direct action when lumps of dry mud were hurled at each other. No doubt, they had then sunk low in the estimation of the villagers who had not expected such indecent behaviour from well-dressed town-bred gentlemen, but before they had done with their preliminary canvassing and left the village, they had conveyed a new idea to the villagers about the rights of the villagers and their

importance. 'Brothers and Sisters,' each party had told the villagers from a platform. 'Do you know what tremendous power is there in your hands, with your right to vote? Let us explain it all to you.' Pemi's mother, listening to their speeches, had understood, in her own way, what that power was. To her it appeared such a powerful weapon in the hands of villagers that city-snobs humbled themselves before them, begged for their favours and offered entreaties, protestations and promises Such was the power that it would enable them to appoint persons who would govern the country, prevent floods and famines, lower the prices of rice and other daily necessities. It would make their fields yield better harvest and destroy the mosquitoes that were causing malaria. Particularly in their own village, it would raise a fine building for a High School, build a spacious platform under the big banyan tree where the villagers often sat and talked, reduce land-rents, introduce many new machines which the villagers had never seen before and bring in remarkable improvements in their standard of living. It would give them so many other good things they had never known.

She believed that she, Pemi's mother, a nonentity for whom no one had ever cared till then, held that power in her hands and that all that she had to do to exercise that power was to thrust a particular bit of paper into a box indicating her preference for one of the three contesting candidates. She had learnt too, that the candidate in whose box maximum number of papers would be found would be declared winner and that a group or as it was called, a 'Party' of which the maximum number of candidates were thus elected would get the power to form the Government of the country and would be able to do all the good things for the people. She thought how simple it all was, and how, while she lived in that remote village, she would be directly linked to the power that would rule the country. She exulted in her power, that was within her. She remembered the line from the scripture, the Bhagvata, which said that in every being there was God. She wondered how nobody had ever taken any notice of her even though there was God in her and yet, because of the other power that she now possessed, the power of the vote, three groups of people had come to her and had begged her for her vote.

While these thoughts came to her, the 'I' in her, which, as it were,

so long lay under the weight of a boulder, stirred and reared its head. She felt that at last the day had come when she would vindicate herself by casting her vote.

It was then that her face in the mirror flashed a smile. She looked at it intently. The customary vermilion mark had been put on the forehead, but the skin was shrivelled, and discoloured, as if her face had been scorched by heat and her complexion looked almost dark. She wondered what had happened to her skin that had once a tinge of gold in natural white when she had first arrived in that village as a bride. She remembered how that had been the talk of the village and how elderly women had extolled her complexion within the hearing of their daughters-in-law. She could not believe that while she was only forty-five her complexion had been spoilt for good. Looking at her face she thought that she could still find the original complexion of her skin on the spots where the skin stretched while she grinned. She felt strong, confident and dignified. She thought that she had discovered her worth. And suddenly, she burst into laughter.

Though she was alone in her house at the moment, she tried to check herself. But she could not stop laughing even though she reminded herself that only children laughed for no obvious reason and it was said that Yama, the god of Death, made them laugh.

Suddenly her mood of gaiety was gone and her laughter vanished. She had put her palm on the fold of her sari which covered the rear of her scalp and had then felt a tell-tale seam in the *sari* where she had sewn up a long rent. It lay across her head like an ugly centipede. She shuddered at the thought that when she would go out to vote, nobody could miss that seam. The people would at once know that she had nothing better to wear for that occasion than an old, tattered and sewn sari. They would then conclude that she was very poor and they could make unwholesome speculations about the status and the class to which her parents belonged and also to which her husband belonged. And yet she could do nothing about it. The seam could not be concealed and she had nothing better to put on. Her other saris were either tattered or were both torn and soiled.

She began to brood over her plight. Both by birth and by marriage, she belonged to the class known as the zamindars, that had been next

in rank to the kings in medieval society, owning estates, lands, special rights and privileges which had been denied to others. But the zamindari had been abolished and the halcyon days of the members of that class were gone. Of the cultivable lands that had fallen to her husband's share, a large portion had been sold away in order to find money to get their daughters Pemi and Chemi married, for, in keeping with their status, they had to perform the weddings with pomp and eclat even if they had to starve. It was unthinkable for people of their class to till their own lands. That would be simply incompatible with their aristocracy. Their lands were being cultivated by share-croppers and as the part of the produce a share cropper was required to hand over to the owner of the land had been reduced by revised laws, the share croppers of their lands had been giving them only one fourth of the annual yield and had been appropriating the rest. Her husband, forced to seek some additional source of income, had taken to healing the sick by homeopathy, but his fees hardly ever amounted to more than a rupee a day and more often, he received a dozen onions, a kilogram of potatoes or half a kilogram of pulses as fees from some grateful patients. Their eldest son, Panchua, maintained accounts for a grocer in the city but his earnings hardly sufficed for his own maintenance. Their youngest son, Musa, displayed such an allergy for studies that he could not learn even how to sign his name, but his strong build and his impressive appearance secured him a watchman's job in a weaving factory. His pay was not even enough to buy himself sufficient food.

Pemi's mother was absorbed in a contemplation on the aspect of her life that was enmeshed in want and poverty. It was dark and suffocating and there was no way out. Her mood had changed. She no more looked at the mirror as she sat there sighing at intervals.

The ancestors of her husband had lived in their stately, multi-roomed house that had stood on the very site where she and her husband had their small, two-roomed cottage. They had been the zamindars of the area. The big door at the entrance of their house had been made of bell-metal plates and its loud clang could be heard over a distance of five miles when it was shut at night. The beams and rafters of the roof were made of seasoned timber that had been polished and decorated with artistic wood carvings. The grandeur of

that house now lay in dust. On the site where once stood its walls, there was now a fence of dry bamboo twigs. The debris lay under scattered mounds of earth and here and there could be found an abandoned altar which was a small raised platform of dry mud on which a marriage or some other ceremony had taken place. The high mud-floors and courtyards of the ruined house were now ideal for growing vegetables, particularly brinjal, but as there was taboo in their society against growing brinjal on abandoned house sites, patches of that high and flat space had been covered with leafy vegetables and the rest lay bare.

On the site where there had once been the outer room with the bell-metal door, there was now a small room with a tattered thatch with gaping holes. In it stood a book-rack made of planks from cheap packing boxes. The rack contained the medicine-box of Pemi's father and he used that room as his homeopathic dispensary. That was also the outer room of his house. Instead of a flight of steps the entrance to that room from the ground below was a smooth incline on a stony surface. It was the Dragway Step, a relic of the past, and the right to have it at one's door was a mark of special recognition that could be conferred on an aristocratic family by the king. Another relic of its former glory was an ornamented terracotta vase, shaped like a temple and about six feet tall which stood on one side of the Dragway step. It was the vase in which the sacred Tulsi plant worshipped daily in every house, was nurtured. The plant in that particular vase was barely six inches tall; it was thin and emaciated and had somehow managed to survive.

Even the name Pemi's father bore had a pompous medieval dignity about it. While the names of ordinary people were generally made of two words, the first word being the name given at birth and the second the surname which indicated the caste, the name of Pemi's father was made of four words. It was Brajakishore Bharamarbar Ray Mahapatra. His parents had named him Brajakishore. Mahapatra was his caste name. He belonged to the Khandayat-Kshyatriya Clan. Bhramarbar and Ray were titles bestowed on the nobility of yore.

Brajakishore and his family lived in two rooms within a fenced enclosure. The rooms were in bad shape as they had no money to maintain them.

At the other end of the enclosed area interrupted by a vacant patch of ground one could see three rooms in a row. The roof looked strong, the thatch was fresh and thick. The walls were prim and smooth, bearing the signs of careful attention and of plastering with mud at regular intervals. Another room was going to be added and women of the 'Bauri' caste were at work, piling up puddled mud for raising walls. Pemi's mother, sitting at her home, turned her attention towards the other house and at once she had the feeling that it was her enemy's. That was in fact the house of Bhanjakishore, her husband's younger brother, and his wife known as Ranga's mother. There was no love lost between the two brothers and between their spouses.

It seemed queer to Pemi's mother that her husband's younger brother bore a name that perfectly matched her husband's. It was not merely that the two names rhymed well, but, while her husband's name began with the letter 'Ba', his younger brother's name began with the next letter in the alphabet, 'Bha'. She could appreciate why their father had selected that name for the younger of his two sons. Obviously, it was his dream that the two brothers should remain the best of friends, and the younger of the two should always offer the pride of place to his elder brother and follow obediently in his footsteps, looking to him for advice and guidance in every matter. But such was the irony of life that his hope never materialised, and the younger brother had set his face against his elder brother. She contemptuously called him 'Bhanjia'.

She could see Bhanjia's wife passing through the open ground in front of her house. She was plump and tall and was laden with gold ornaments which jingled and as she walked she held her head erect. Her poise, her lumbering gait, even her very appearance struck Pemi's mother as insolent and repulsive. And now Ranga's mother was calling aloud to Paluni's mother, 'I say, Paluni's mother, you lazy bones, why don't you hurry up? Aren't we going to cast our votes?'

Pemi's mother was consumed with hatred as she looked at Ranga's mother. She could not take her eyes off her. Here, before her stood a woman who lacked nothing of the good things of life and lived happily with her husband and her children. There were her two younger kids, both sons, romping gaily around her. Her husband,

Brajakishore, had his flourishing business in timber; his depot was in the city where he owned another house. They had two grown-up sons, they lived with their father in the city and both had made a start in life as clerks in two offices. They had three daughters; all had been given away in marriage to promising young men. Their eldest daughter had married a businessman who took contracts for digging and piling earth and had grown rich. Two other daughters had been given in marriage to two well-paid officers, one an Inspector of School and the other a Sub-Inspector in the Excise Department.

Pemi's mother also recalled how Ranga's mother lorded it over her husband; he was almost tied to her apron strings. It was she who directed his business for him and she even scrutinised the accounts of his trade. She lived with him in the city and had come down temporarily to the village because she wanted to add some rooms to their house, to buy more lands and to raise orchards.

As she concentrated her thoughts on Ranga's mother, her jealousy and her spite were fed by more and more of recollections of daily incidents. She thought of the ungrateful world that forgot only too soon all the benefits that it received. Here on the same homestead lived four other families that were branches of the ancestral family to which her husband belonged. They had their houses separated from one another. Paluni's mother belonged to one such house. The family was poor and often in the past she had done it a good turn. Paluni's mother had been one of her close associates all her life. But now she had changed over to the side of Ranga's mother. Pemi's mother recalled an incident which had taken place a month back. Ranga's mother had come from the city. She remembered, it was a Tuesday night. She was called to the house of Paluni's mother by her frantic cries for help. Her youngest child, a girl, lay helpless in bed. The little girl was having severe fits of vomiting, spewing up not only from her mouth but also from her nose, and suddenly, she threw her head to one side and lay inert. Pemi's mother ran home and informed her husband and he cured the child in no time with only two homeopathic doses.

Where was Ranga's mother then? She now thought sarcastically. She remembered, how after Ranga's mother had arrived, Paluni's mother, who had been a patient of amoebic dysentery, and had often

taken medicines from her which she obtained for her from her husband, instead took medicines now from Ranga's mother and, as if that was not enough, she had even cursed homeopathy as fake! Now she was spending all her time with Ranga's mother, spying for her and carrying tales to her about other people.

What a creature! What a spineless person! Pemi's mother thought. To think that she too had a right to vote!

Besides the families of Pemi's mother, Ranga's mother, and Paluni's mother, three other families of common ancestry lived within the fenced enclosure. Two were of the divided uterine brothers, Gadei and Sadei and the third of Pari's mother. Pemi's mother recalled, how the last two had joined the following of Ranga's mother and how Sadei had even offered to sell some of his lands to her.

And these worthless creatures also have been given the right to vote! What a shame! She thought bitterly as she heard Ranga's mother calling out to them all to get ready.

There was only Gadei who was still on her side and she was eager to know from him for which party Ranga's mother and her followers were going to vote so that she would vote for some other party.

Gadei came to her and she felt relieved. He was a thin, bony man of less than medium height with a jet-black complexion and shining bald head. His eyes were small and misty and were often turned to the ground.

'So you have come!' She hailed him, 'Now, sit down. And let me get my *pan*-box to prepare a *pan* for you. Your brother is away, treating a patient.'

'I know that, sister-in-law,' said Gadei, 'I saw him on his way to the Harijan quarters and he asked me to take you to the polling booth for voting. Are you ready?'

'Yes, but let me first fetch my *pan*-box. I won't take long.' She went in.

She admired Gadei for his will-power, his industry and his intelligence. She remembered, how in the face of heavy odds, he had not only been able to keep his head high but had prospered too. When a control on the sales of essential commodities was introduced, he obtained a licence for selling sugar and kerosene and set up a shop. It had grown to be the biggest store in the village. It now fetched

him a steady net income of two hundred rupees a month and had made him an important person in the locality, so much so that it made him an important person in the locality, so much so that those parties canvassing for votes counted on his favour. What particularly pleased her was that he had outwitted her husband's younger brother, Bhanjakishore, by his cunning and Bhanjakishore could do nothing about it. He had borrowed two hundred rupees from Bhanjakishore who had been taken in by a promise that he would sell a piece of land to him. Gadei did nothing of the sort. He never repaid the loan and whenever asked, gave an innocent reply, pleading, 'Where have I the money to pay back your loan? You are welcome to recover it by any means you'd like to employ. I won't object.' And that was the end of the matter. Bhanjakishore had not even obtained a receipt from him for the money lent and so he knew that a law-suit won't be of any use. He bore him an ill-will, but Gadei was not afraid.

Pemi's mother came out with her *pan*-box. As she began to prepare *pan* for Gadei and for herself, she shot a question at him.

'For which party are they going to vote?'

'How should I know that, sister-in-law?'

'But that is most essential for us and you must find it out by any means. Surely, you and I are not going to vote for the same party for which Ranga's mother and her group will vote! If they vote for the symbol of the palm tree, we shall vote for that of the mango tree. If they vote for the symbol of the hen, we shall vote for that of the wild cat.'

'But what's all this?' Gadei exclaimed, 'A palm tree, a mango tree, a hen, a wild cat! Who put it into your head that there were such symbols for any party in this election?'

'Never mind if there aren't. But we are not going to vote for the party of their choice. I would never!' And then she exploded, 'Look at those wretches! How long shall I tolerate this wicked audacity? They know that your brother is simple and inoffensive and would rather suffer than retaliate and so they choose him as their target and rob him of his land. Hasn't Ranga's mother already encroached upon our compound and annexed a strip of four feet and a half to her own in the extention that she is building? They have no shame; so they parade their riches too! How shocking! What upstarts!'

Gadei did not look up. He smiled. 'Is this battle of votes going to be a wrestling match between my two sisters-in-law?' he meekly asked. 'I can then predict the result. You are no match for her. Ranga's mother is a heavy-weight champion.'

'A fig for your jokes!' she chided him. 'This is a serious matter. We must never vote for the candidate for which she votes. Never.' She stopped abruptly for she saw that the labourer women who had been engaged on the site of construction of the new rooms for the house of Ranga's mother had stopped working and were being led away by Gandhia, a servant of Ranga's mother. They were on their way to the polling booth.

Gadei stopped them and asked, 'You are off to the voting place, aren't you?'

'Yes', they replied.

'Which party have you decided to vote for?' he asked.

'That is as our mistress has directed us,' several voices replied. 'Is she not our employer and our bread-giver? How can we disobey her?'

'But listen', Gadei argued, It is not a matter of expressing gratitude to an employer or obeying her. You are required to vote for the party which impresses you as the worthiest. Why cannot you decide that by yourself? Surely, you can think of a party that did something to improve your lot! You are landless, you cultivate lands belonging to other people as share-croppers. Your share of the produce from a land was one fourth of the total, but a certain party made a law by which it was raised to three fourths of the total harvest. What do you think of that party? Shouldn't at least you folks vote for it though the land-owner may not?'

'Your arguments do not enter our heads, Sir', one of them said. 'We are simple folks. All that we know is that God does everything, whether it is good or evil. So, if something happens, we bow to God. When the heavy floods come and sweep away everything before it, villages, animals and standing crops, we know that God has sent it. But it is God again who sends relief for the flood-stricken, and rice and rice-flakes arrive in the flooded areas and are distributed. So, when by law, the share-croppers' share of produce from a land was increased to three fourths of the yield, we knew it was God's kindness. That, however, has no connection with this voting. Let us go.'

'Let us hear for which party you will vote.' Gadei pleaded.

'We won't disclose it', some voices answered bluntly. 'We have been told to keep it a secret'.

As they moved on some one even asked, 'How does it concern you, Sir?'

'How disgusting! What insolence!' Pemi's mother exclaimed, 'To think that even those landless Harijan women labourers dare defy respectable Zamindars and argue with them! What are the times coming to?'

'That is as it should be in this Dark Age,' Gadei replied.

The village school had been converted into a polling booth and the three contesting parties had set up their camps a furlong away from the booth on three sides of it. One camp had been set up to the east of the school under a big pipal tree near the quarters where washermen lived. In a Hindu village, it was the special prerogative of people of the washermen caste to butcher goats for meat for the villagers. Here in this village, that job used to be done under that pipal tree. Another party had been camping in the vacant house site of Satura Kela, in the quarter where people of the 'Kela' caste lived. They were professional snake-charmers and acrobats. The third party had put up its camp on the fringe of the village cremation ground. The camps were improvised flat-roofed huts of twigs and leaves.

All the parties had brought their jeeps to the village for canvassing for votes and even in the hot sun at noon, jeeps could be seen running about in surrounding villages, along narrow and winding alleys and mud roads, trailed by a swirl of dust. Two of the parties had sent back their jeeps, but the party that had its camp on the edge of the cremation ground had its jeep in the village for the entire week preceding the date of polling. It grew popular with children irrespective of caste and class, they would clamber into it and then be taken on a joy ride from one end of the village where there was the Shiva temple to the other end where there was the Hanuman temple and then all round the village over and over again. The jeep scoured the meadows and ran along the village lanes. It was packed to the point of bursting, and whenever it slowed down, several children hung from its tail-board while crowds of more children ran behind it, shouting excitedly. Many of them came from the quarters where

milkmen and fishermen lived, and most of the villagers belonged to these two castes.

The party that had its camp near the cremation ground had more workers than the two other parties. It had complete outfit of what the villagers called a Singing Machine and which no other party had brought—a big gramophone, microphones, loudspeakers, batteries and wires. The Singing Machine blared out songs and other kinds of music over the village and the cremation ground and wise and the elders were heard praising the mind of the party that owned it. Not only had they provided entertainment for the living, but also had done so for the dead, since it was commonly believed that the spirits of the dead hovered over the cremation ground.

Pemi's mother had formed a high opinion of that party and she had a special reason for it. She had been fond of a particular song since her childhood and was conversant with the typical tune with which it was to be sung. She found that the Singing Machine sang out that song in an identical tune. She was impressed. The song had been composed in the AD eighteen century by the famous Oriya poet Upendra Bhanja and it occurred in his *Baideheesha Bilasa*, a poetical work which dealt with the story of the Ramayana. Each poem in that work had its own typical tune; each an item in the repertoire of tunes of the classical music of Orissa. The poem which the Singing Machine sang and which impressed Pemi's mother described the grief of Surpanakha, Ravana's sister when she reached her native town Lanka, bleeding from her injuries on the nose and the ears and piteously weeping, because at the instance of Rama, his brother Lakshmana had made cuts on her nose and ears when he offered her love to Rama in the forest.

The party that had its camp under the pipal tree where washermen used to slaughter goats for selling meat to the villagers had engaged a singer to compete with the performance of the party with the Singing Machine. The singer was bellowing out an exciting song describing the last battle of Ravana with Rama, a battle that ended in Ravana's death. It was from the *Bichitra Ramayana*, a poetical work composed in the eighteenth century by Biswanath Khuntia. Every poem of that work too had been set to a separate tune, the tunes so presented being some of the best samples of the classical music

of Orissa. Few Oriya poets could match Upendra Bhanja in literary skill and in the musical contents of his lines and Biswanath Khuntia could hardly bear comparison with him, but Biswanath was more easily understood by all and sundry because of the simplicity of his language and his poems, set to classical modes and sung frequently, enjoying a wide popularity.

A group of women listened to both the performances and attempted to compare their excellence. Pemi's mother was one of them. They were unanimous in the view that the deep bass voice of the singer coming from the goat-slaughtering yard under the Pipal tree had strength and vitality and it deserved to be praised. It could travel far. It had such force that when it hit the boughs of trees overhead, the mud nests of white ants on those boughs fell scattered on the ground. But, in their opinion, the voice of the singer that could be heard from the Singing Machine, singing of Surpanakha's misery, was much more appealing. It conveyed such pathos that it could stir emotions even in the trees and their branches; it could not pull down white ants' nests from the boughs, but it made the trees weep, as it were, and to shed their leaves.

The mind of Pemi's mother had thus been finally made up in favour of the party that had the Singing Machine and she made her decision to cast her vote in its favour when she received a jolt. She saw Ranga's mother leading a group of women towards the polling centre. Behind her was Paluni's mother while Jogi Padhan's daughter Tenteyi made up the rear. As the group marched ahead, Tenteyi slowed down, came closer to her and whispered. 'It is the cremation ground folks they are going to vote for.' Tenteyi moved on and Pemi's mother gave a hard pinch to her companion Gadei on the arm with her finger nails. Gadei winced with pain and rubbed his arm where it hurt.

They were now in the midst of a crowd. People from all quarters of their villages had come to vote and people from the neighbouring villages were pouring in. Pemi's mother drew Gadei aside and said in a low voice,

'Now I know who they are going to vote for.'

Gadei kept silent.

'It is for that party.'

He understood her when she said 'they'. He knew she meant Ranga's mother and those who followed her. But he could not understand which party she had referred to. But he did not care.

'Well, the choice is theirs', he said, 'One can vote for anybody one likes!'

She was not to be put off by what she considered was an evasive reply.

'You don't understand, Gadei', she said pleadingly, 'since they will vote for that party we must vote for some other party. Let us vote for the party that has camped in the snake charmers' street. I have observed its members for some time and I am certain that it is the most deserving of the three parties in the field. No matter if it has no jeep. It is a party of bright youngmen, unassuming and amiable, who are quite at home with common people. They must be city-bred and educated ones from respectable families though they do not give themselves airs. Did not you notice how, upon their arrival in our village, they went to every home, sat in the dust on the outer verandahs of the houses and begged for the common rice gruel that the poor drink when hungry and thirsty? That has been their practice in our village. It shows that they look upon every common villager as their kith and kin. It does not matter if they do not possess a Singing Machine, in fact they are better musicians than any that the other parties have. They sing excellently well. They are adept in all the simple musical instruments that our villagers use, such as the *Khanjani*, the *Dhuduki* and the *Kendra*. It is wonderful how they tap on the back of upturned earthen pots and make sweet music. You should hear them when they sing songs to attack their opponents, the two other parties. How their vituperations cascade down! And all so musically! What a command over words! What scathing satire! I am sure, none can excel them in that art. So, that is final. Let us vote for their party.'

Gadei felt outraged. 'That would be sheer madness!' he told her. 'Now, don't be crazy. You don't know those fellows. They are just a gang of disgraceful vagabonds. Let us not talk about them. We shall vote for the other party that is camping under the pipal tree. This is the best. And my brother told me to tell you that. Look! Here goes Kempa. And Kempa too is a voter. Hey Kempa!'

Gadei called a deformed man with his mouth twisted to his right, his arms thin and twisted at the elbow and his right leg shorter than the left, bent like a bow, who was hurriedly limping towards the polling booth, his arms swinging like the flapping wings of a queer bird. His progress resembled a series of low jumps. Once his right leg took a step forward, the left drew up behind, straight and stiff, like a leaning pole. His name 'Kempa' meant he was deformed from birth. Being disabled, he could not work for his living and was being maintained by his wife on her scanty income as a street peddler in the village, selling small quantities of salt and edible oils. Kempa did not appear to have heard that he had been called. He was wobbling forward as fast as his poor legs could carry him. Gadei shouted after him.

'Hey Kempa! What's the matter with you? You are almost racing! Stop, Kempa! Listen.'

Kempa stopped and turned round facing him with an ugly grimace.

'Kempa! Kempa!' he cried out in anger, 'Calling me from behind when I am out on business! Don't you know that calling a person from behind when he is on his way somewhere is an ill-omen for him and it portends that he will have no success? You did that on purpose, didn't you? Now who do you think you are and what is Kempa to you that you can harass him at your pleasure? Am I your servant? Do I have my hut in your backyard?'

'I did not mean to offend you, Kempa, why do you fly into such a rage?'

'Rage!' Kempa shrieked out, echoing him. 'As if you don't know what harm you have done me! You called me from behind; you have ruined all my chances of success. What worse could you done? But I demand to know, why?'

Raghu Barik came forward. 'Cool yourself, Kempa, and learn to behave with respectable people of the upper classes,' he said. 'Have you taken leave of your senses? Don't you know that he belongs to the family of our hereditary Zamindars, our masters who owned this entire village? And fool that you are, you are storming at him on the public road! You should be ashamed of yourself. After all, what harm has he done to you? He called to you by your name and you start abusing him?'

Kempa put his leg forward, dealt him a push and shouted, 'Don't threaten me with the bogey of a master. I have no master and I am a free man. If you think he is your master, go, lick his feet, eat from his cast-off leaf-plates and be happy. Don't start a quarrel with me, I have nothing against you.'

This was too much for Raghu Barik. Everybody knew that the deformed man was at times liable to sudden fits of anger without any rhyme or reason, and people did not take notice of that, but Raghu Barik could not control his anger.

'So, you want something more than mere words, you fellow!' he shouted, 'You want me to teach you a lesson?

'You bully, you strutting cock', Kempa rebuffed. 'Don't try to bully me; none of your red eyes for me! I am not afraid of you. Let this enter your fat head. Here in our free country, nobody is too big for another person. A king has a single vote and so has a common tenant. Pandit Nehru has just one vote and so have I.'

'So that is how it is!' Raghu Barik cried as he fell upon Kempa, forgetting that the fellow was deformed and handicapped, and as he pummelled him with slaps and blows while shouting. 'Keep your vote to yourself. You should know that I too have my vote. And now take this. And this, And more.'

Kempa fell down and howled. People came rushing to him. They were from several villages. A woman whom nobody knew there and who had seen nothing of the incident went about wringing her hands and crying piteously: 'A murderer! A murderer! He has killed the poor man! God save us! Now, what am I to do? Where am I to go?'

It did not seem that she did not know where to go; she was moving steadily towards the polling booth. But her loud walls had attracted the keepers of the peace. There were two police constables in khaki uniforms and red turbans. They rushed to the scene, the long bamboo sticks in their hands raised to strike. At last there was a job for them to do! The crowd scattered and a group of women panicked and took to their heels.

A new situation developed, for the supporters and the representatives of the three contesting parties appeared on the scene and accused the policemen of scaring the voters away by show of force.

'Look here, both of you,' they said. 'We take serious note of your high-handed action. You have created a panic among innocent voters

by your unwarranted show of force. You raised your bamboo poles at them with a threatening gesture and innumerable voters fled out of fear, without casting their votes. This means heavy loss of votes for each of our parties. This is a very serious matter. We are not going to leave it like that. It will certainly be reported to the authorities. We protest. We demand justice.'

'But don't you see, sirs!' the police constable pleaded, 'A breach of the peace was imminent and it would have happened if we had not intervened? What else are we here for?'

'That is nonsense. It is you who caused a breach of the peace, nobody else did it. This is the day of polling and here you are scaring away the voters!'

'Brothers unite! This is sheer injustice. This must be set right.'

'Let us boycott the polls and go back.'

'What a silly idea? Turn tail and go back home! No! Come forward. Advance. Let us settle with them.'

Various suggestions could be heard from different quarters in that motley crowd.

It was a big crowed, closely packed like the crowd that gathers on the occasion of the Dol Jatra festival when people from different villages assemble in a field where the different village deities were brought in decorated wooden pagodas. Meanwhile, Kempa had got up and had quietly run away through the crowd towards the polling booth. He had entered the booth, cast his vote and had come out. He sucked at the inner surface of his left thumb which had been marked by a black dot in indelible ink so that he could not come a second time to cast his vote fraudulently. As he passed, people asked him, 'For whom did you vote?' 'I voted for whomsoever I chose!' Kempa went away muttering. 'That is my business. I can cast my vote again after five years if I am alive then. Why should people ask me? Don't they know the scriptures?

Whoever your hunger appeases
You should sing his praises

Isn't that right? Or, as they say, one should never defecate on the leaf-plate containing one's meal.' Now, who will give us bread? Who will take care of our well-being? Who will manage the affairs of our country most efficiently? I have voted for the party that will do all

that. It will surely win, you see!' He aired his views freely but revealed no name.

He went away. The quarrel that had begun outside the polling booth had ended and the two keepers of the peace had discreetly gone back to the shadow under the mango tree at some distance without making any more fuss.

Pemi's mother advanced towards the entrance of the polling booth. She looked round and saw the crowds. She saw men and women from different villages but their faces were unfamiliar to her. The atmosphere was strange and forbidding and she felt lost. Shopping stalls had come up. There was a loud buzz of human voices, people chatted together as they stood waiting to cast their votes, but she could not follow their debates and discussion. Her experience when she stood for a time listening to that chatter was the same as it had been when the three contesting parties held their meetings in the village separately and delivered their election speeches. She had heard such words as Bharat, Pakistan, the Kashmir Problem Boundary Dispute, demands, manifestoes, etc. But these words had conveyed no meaning to her and she had felt that she had never come across any of them in her daily life.

Gadei led through the crowd to the entrance of the two barricaded pathways flanked by bamboo poles fixed on the ground and criss-crossed with pieces of bamboo. One of the pathways was meant for men and the other for women and both led to the school door. There were long queues along the pathways and there was a big crowd around from which a din arose.

The scene was unfamiliar to Pemi's mother, most of the people in the crowd were strangers to her and she fell ill at ease amidst them. Gadei left her at the entrance of the passage meant for women and took leave of her. 'You have simply to move forward with this queue and you will get into the polling booth. There are officers inside who will give you the ballot papers and tell you how to cast your vote. There will be no difficulty. But don't forget what I told you before,' he told her.

He was gone. She entered the barricaded passage. A long queque of women was slowly moving in front of her and behind her came other women. To her right was the queue for men, more closely

packed. The queques came to standstill at times for entry into the polling booth was being regulated by a guard standing at the entrance who received his orders from officers inside the room.

Pemi's mother reminded herself about Gadei's instruction but in her confusion, she could not recollect which party he had asked her to vote for. Nor could she remember the advice given to her by her husband. She then realized that although at one time she had developed a preference of her own for one of the three rival parties, she could neither recollect which party it was nor why she had made the decision. As she thought on the subject she realized that she knew nothing about any of the parties, far less about its aims and abilities; she knew nothing about politics and government; all she knew was that a party in whose favour the maximum number of votes were cast would get the power to govern the country for a period of five years.

The queque had started moving. She felt that the moment was at hand when she would at last cast her vote. Yet she did not know in whose favour she would do so. She had made no decision and had no knowledge nor information that would enable her to come to a decision. She felt more and more confused and her confusion bordered on panic.

Suddenly she found herself inside the polling booth. That was a room in the village school from which the black-board, children's desks, and in fact all the furniture and the pictures had been removed. Some new furniture and articles had been brought in and had been arranged in a particular order, and the room had a new look. To Pemi's mother, it was an alien world. The faces were strange, even the air had a different smell.

She looked round the room.

Starting from the door, there was a row of tables and chairs placed close to the walls. The first three seats were occupied by the polling agents of the three parties. They were glancing through the printed lists of names placed on their tables and were ticking off the names of the voters when they approached the two officers sitting at a distance and the officers verified their names from the printed electoral rolls. As there was a crowd at the table of those two officers, Pemi's mother waited for her turn and meanwhile, observed them more closely. One of them was unusually tall, thin and bony and had

a beard. He was of fair complexion, but his thin, long face had an unhealthy pallor and looked ashen. He wore a white skull-cap embroidered with a floral design. His shirt and trousers seemed too loose and baggy for his thin, bony figure and appeared to hang from a bamboo frame. By contract, his companion was thickset, almost fat and had a round face. He reminded her of Ranga's mother. She thought with amusement how just and proper it would be if by some miracle a portion of his back could be taken off him and added to the tall and lean man, to the mutual advantage of both.

She observed that when a voter came to their table, the two officers asked for his name and address which they would then look up in some printed lists which lay open before them. They would then ask the voter to move up to the next table. The officer sitting at the next table looked at his left thumb in order to see if it bore any mark and then gave him two ballot papers, one for casting his vote for the State Assembly and the other for another candidate to the Lok Sabha. The officer would then ask another officer, who sat near him, to put a dot mark on the inner surface of the left thumb of the voter with an indelible black ink and satisfy himself that such a mark was put. The voter was then given an ink-pad and a seal for stamping and it was explained to him how he should use them. There was a cubicle the room made of screens tightly drawn on all sides. The way to the cubicle would be shown to the voter and he would be asked to go into that cubicle, stamp the two ballot papers against the names of the candidates of his choice, fold the papers and thrust them into the ballot boxes. Each voter was told that there were six candidates for the two seats and a separate ballot box had been allotted to each candidate and that the six boxes had been placed in a row on a table inside the enclosure.

After the voter came out of the cubicle, the stamping pad and the seal given to him were taken back from him and he was then escorted to the exit door.

It was impressed on the voters from time to time that they should keep the names of the candidates and the parties for which they had voted or were going to vote, a secret from others.

There were other officers, waiting or moving about. There were some who sat quietly and looked grim. All the officers were in

trousers and shirts and some even put on coats. Policemen in their khaki uniform and red turbans walked up and down. Pemi's mother's feeling of strangeness continued. She found the environment to be formal, chilling and forbidding. She wished she were out of the room as soon as possible. She had been worrying so long as to how to decide in an instant which party she should vote for, and had not yet succeeded in coming to a decision, but that worry was relegated to the background by her feeling of loneliness, strangeness and incompatibility with her surroundings.

Her thoughts went over to Ranga's mother and her husband, Bhanjakishore, who was her husband's brother and was wealthy, no more with anger and hatred, but with anguish because the two families lived divided and separate from each other. She sighed and thought how happy she would have been if the brothers had lived together in a joint family.

She suddenly remembered the stretch of stitching at the end of her sari that lay on her head. Everyone present had noticed that and some must be staring at it even then—she was sure. Her palm went out to it automatically and she put it over the seam. She was flushed with shame. An old lady who wore a gold nose-ring and had preceded her had already received her ballot papers, the stamping pad and the seal and gone to the screened enclosure. It was now clearly the turn of Pemi's mother to approach the two officers and to announce her name. Two other women had come up behind her. But she stood silent, rooted to the spot and confused, before those officers.

'Your name? 'the tall, lean, bearded man asked her in a deep tone. He repeated the question in quick succession. 'Yes, your name please, Madam?'

She had no occasion before to appear before strangers, far less to be spoken to by any, and she found it quite disagreeable that she should be asked by that bearded stranger to reveal her name. She hung her head, consumed with a sense of shame. She felt a resentment against her husband because he was not by her side at this crucial moment in her life. She was in a terrible predicament. She tried to summon courage by reminding herself that she was no coward and unlike some others whom she knew, she had never been afraid when alone inside a temple. Her argument did not convince

herself for, she knew all the time that the sacred deity to whom she offered her prayers would never speak to her. But the bearded man repeated his question a third time.

'Your name, madam? Why don't you tell your name?' She could not fail to detect a note of impatience and vexation in his voice. At once, his companion, and the three agents of the contesting parties joined in with coaxing words, 'Please, madam, do kindly mention your name!'

She looked at their faces. Looked down again and began to think quickly. They wanted her to tell them her name. Would she tell them that she had been known to all the world as Pemi's mother? Or, would she tell them all the other different phrases by which she had been addressed at different times in the past? She rejected the idea, she felt that the people at the tables did not want to hear those loving names from her, they wanted to hear the name that had been given to her at her birth and that no one ever uttered a name that had served no useful purpose. She let them have it.

'Sharadha Sundari!', she said. The lean, bearded officer at once started an assiduous search for that name through the pages of the bunch of printed lists on his table. Looking at him as he bent his head over the papers, Pemi's mother was reminded of Chitragupta and his dossiers on the activities of all the earthly beings. According to the Puranas, Chitragupta was a god who maintained a complete record of every living creature along with the date when it was scheduled to die, and every action done by it whether good or evil and it is he who supplied the information to Yama, the god of Death, who, on the expiry of a creature's allotted span of life, led its soul away in chains and meted out punishment to it, the nature and duration of the punishment varying according to its evil action while it was alive as recorded in Chitragupta's dossiers.

The officer dabbed a finger at a particular entry and without looking up, said, 'Yes, I have found your name. It is here. But it is Sharadha Manjari and not Sharadha Sundari. And your husband's name is Bhanjakishore Bhramarbar Ray Mahapatra.'

The idea that any one could confuse her identity with that of Ranga's mother and announce in public that Bhanja who was her husband's younger brother was her husband, was so atrocious to her

that she felt choked with anger, her ears grew hot and tingled with shame, her face flushed. It was taboo for a Hindu woman of her community to utter her husband's name and she did not see anybody familiar there who would tell the officer what her husband's name was. Not accustomed to speaking before strangers she felt too shy to explain to him the blunder he had committed. She was shaking her head vigorously from side to side to indicate disapproval and a strong denial of his statement.

'So Bhanjakishore is not your husband!' the officer said in disbelief as he stared at the entry. 'Strange! However, let us see!' And while she boiled in anger, he turned over the pages of the list.

His companion was pouring over another bunch of the lists. He tapped over an entry with the flat end of his pencil and nodded with an air of satisfaction. He raised his face, looked at her gravely and asked, 'Perhaps your husband's name is Lakshman Malik. Right? It is recorded here.'

This was a suggestion far more atrocious. It was a grave outrage against her status and respectability.

Words of abuse spontaneously hurled by women of the countryside at their enemies in a conflict were mentally poured by her on that officer. 'Accused man!' she said without uttering, 'You must be the son of a wretch who was devoured by a snake! May you soon die of cholera! May your corpse be thrown into a pit! May you beaten by a supernatural being of the class of the Yoginis!'

She was trembling in rage, but she did not open her lips.

She even felt an urge to spit on the officer's face in contempt an fury. But she did nothing of the sort. She stood there without a word, chewing a *pan* that she had tucked into her mouth. Since the ingredients in her *pan* was too strong and pungent for her tongue to tolerate, she did what she normally did on such occasions. She spat out the partly chewed *pan* and the red saliva accompanying it on the floor of the room and in full sight of those startled men. But the very next moment she realized with horror what she had done and instinctively put one foot over the partly chewed *pan* in a bid to conceal it while she tried to obliterate the rest of the mess merely by rubbing her other foot on it. But that only spread the foul matter over a wider area.

Nobody spoke. The city-bred gentlemen maintained a stony silence. All the reproof that they intended for her was in their eyes.

Then the tall, lean man with a beard raised his trunk stiffly and looking her full in the face, asked, 'Is your husband's name Lakshman malik? What is your answer?'

Her eyes narrowed and twinkled. She thrust out her lower-jaw, the jutting teeth of her upper jaw clattered again and again on those of her lower jaw.

'Why should Lakshman Malik be my husband?' She hissed at the bearded officer, 'Why should he not be someone else's husband?'

'What do you mean?'

'Why can't Nakhan Malik be your mother's husband?' she shrieked at him, 'Nakhan Malik! Bhanjakishore!'

'What's the matter with you?' the officer asked politely, 'Do tell me, auntie, my mother's sister, what makes you angry?'

'His mother's sister Indeed!' She cried, 'Little do I care to be his mother's sister!' She turned her back on him and took two steps towards the entrance door, intending to leave the room, but some one stood in front of her with arms outstretched, barring her way. He pleaded with her.

'Please don't go away. Listen. Please wait a little. Now, listen.'

She twisted her face in utter contempt and exploded:

'How dare you block my way? You cur! Who do you think you are? Have you taken leave of your senses?' she looked at the entrance door and thundered in anger.

'Is there nobody there who can teach this impertinent fellow a lesson? Come forward. Look at these fellows and see how they behave with us. They have the cheek to tell me that my husband is Bhanjakishore or even Nakhan Malik! What impudence! What a shocking outrage! How dare these fellows insult me publicly here! Deal with them! Who does not know that Bhanjakishore is my husband's younger brother? His wife is Ranga's mother, and she must be on her way to this place. Nakhan Malik is of the low, Kandara caste, he is Harijan. He is a farm hand employed by Bhanjakishore. And these foul wretches dare to suggest that Nakhan Malik is my husband! Why didn't their vile hearts burst when hey harbored such an evil idea? Now answer me, you fellows! How dare

you insult us because the Zamindari system has been abolished and our zamindaries are gone? We don't care if we do not cast our vote at all. Let us stay in our homes while you stay in yours. We wish to have no truck with you. Here, please come Ranga's mother and Paluni's mother. Come here, both of you. It is of course taboo for Ranga's mother to utter the name of her husband's elder brother, but Paluni's mother can tell you his name. Now, Paluni's mother, tell them his name please!' She faced the officers proudly with defiant look.

Ranga's mother and Paluni's mother stood guard flanking her. The faces of both these ladies were flushed with anger. They were no more her enemies, they were her intimate friends.

A hubbub could be heard outside as more people wanted to come in. They wanted to know what was going on there.

The lean man with the beard stood up and folded his palms in a gesture of supplication.

'I beg you to forgive us, madam, if in any way we have hurt your feelings. Let me assure you, respected lady, there was absolutely no intention on our part to give you any offence.'

He could sense an ugly situation. He addressed himself to Pemi's mother, but in fact, was making a public statement to anybody who could hear him. Though he wanted to look unperturbed and even chose his words with care, he slipped in his mental agitation into his native tongue. It was colloquial Oriya but was interspersed with several Urdu words and was spoken with a peculiar outlandish intonation.

'I appeal to your good sense, please set your mind at ease, madam', he said, 'I assure you, no offence was at any time meant to you by any of us here, and nothing of the sort has been done. Please don't misunderstand us. I don't know why you are upset, but whatever it is, forgive us. We are like your children, we give you the respect that our mother deserves, and a mother is always forgiving. Let us recollect, respected lady, what is it that we did? We begged you to tell us your husband's name, you didn't, so we read from the printed lists two names of men given against names which were similar to yours and wanted your views. Perhaps we should not have taken all that trouble and should have told you that as you would not mention

even your husband's name and your name could not therefore be verified from the electoral rolls, we could do nothing for you. But we were eager to help.'

He sat down and mopped the sweat off his face with a kerchief and looked round. Peace seemed to have been restored. Even Pemi's mother had come back and stood with her eyes on the ground. The officer addressed her again and while all eyes were on her, said, 'And now, a request to you, madam, please let me know your husband's name by any means you choose, but be quick. I cannot spend more time on a single voter, there are so many others, and our time is so very limited.'

Pemi's mother proded at the back of Paluni's mother with her finger and hissed, 'Tell him!'

'Her husband's name is Brajakishore Bhramarbar Ray Mahapatra.'

'Yes', said Pemi's mother and Ranga's mother simultaneously and nodded their heads. The two officers then shuffled through the printed lists on the table and the bearded officer, after sometime, said, 'Here is the entry. Sharadha Sundari, wife of Brajakishore Bhramarbar Ray Mahapatra.'

The face of Pemi's mother lit up with a proud smile which she at once suppressed. Then she heard the officer say, 'There must be a Chowkidar in this village. Let him be called. Kindly wait just a little longer, madam.' Her face clouded.

The officer was cursing himself inwardly because it had never struck him before to send for the village Chowkidar. A village Chowkidar was the night watchman of the village of which he was a resident. He was in close touch with the people of the village and furnished all information about them to officers whenever necessary. He periodically visited the Police Station which held jurisdiction over his village and reported births, deaths, epidemics, crimes and other special happenings. He rendered various forms of assistance to officers of the Government. In return for his services, he was given a nominal salary and ownership of some land in his village. He usually belonged to the Harijan caste, 'Kandara'.

Ganga Malik, the village Chowkidar did not take more than a minute to arrive. He had been hanging round outside as was his habit when something was going on in the village. A tall, dark white-

headed old man, slightly bent, he still retained a muscular body, two rows of strong white teeth, his old 'uniform', that is, a turban, a long shirt and a bag, all of a deep blue colour, and a stout, knotted and heavy bamboo stick, six feet tall that was itself the lowest member of a very old and mature male bamboo of a thorny genre. He announced himself, saluted the officers and waited for orders.

The bearded officer looked up at him, pointed his finger at Pemi's mother and asked him, 'You see this respectable lady over there, Chowkidar, can you identify her?'

The Chowkidar folded his palms and touched his forehead as he bowed to her and said, 'Your honour, she is the wife of the elder of the two zamindar brothers of our village, and this other lady to her left,' he bowed to Ranga's mother with folded palms, 'is the wife of the younger brother. Their hereditary title is Bhramarbar Ray Mahapatra, conferred on their ancestors by the King of Orissa and they were themselves like kings at one time. Bhramarbar Ray Mahapatra was at one time name to conjure with. The doors at the entrance to their mansion was made of bell metal. Zamindaries are no more, their house has fallen, but who can forget them, sir? We are their ancestral servants and dependants. I accompanied the procession of the elder zamindar when he went to marry this lady. That was twenty-five years ago though it seems like yesterday. And what a brave and bloody fight we had with the bride's relations and villagers as we entered their village. Thirty people were severely wounded, but it was a fight between the descendants of ancient warriors and nobody complained about it. The wedding took place peacefully and we brought her to our village with great pomp.'

'But you have not yet told me her husband's name, Chowkidar!'

The old man looked bewildered. 'He may be here any moment, Sir,' he said, 'His name is Brajakishore Bhramarbar Ray Mahapatra.'

'That will do. Thank you, Chowkidar. Now Madam, kindly holdup your left thumb before this officer at the table there and the little girl sitting near him will put a small round dot on it with an ink. It won't hurt, it will do you no harm and will vanish in two or three days.'

Pemi's mother moved to the next table. The girl sitting a little apart sprang into action and put a round mark on her thumb with

a black liquid. It was an ugly mark, but she felt an exultation when it was put, as if that ugly mark was the emblem of a high status that was being conferred on her. She had also the same feeling when two ballot papers were handed over to her. For a moment she was under the illusion that documents conferring status, estates and power drawn up in her favour had been placed in her hands.

Instructions about how to cast her votes were repeated to her, but she hardly needed those as she had heard them several time while she stood in the room.

After she had heard the old chowkidar speak to the officer about the glory of her husband's family, she had been transported in her imagination to those glorious feudal times of the past.

But she had, in fact, never known those days. She had remained in the seclusion of the inner apartments of the house during the time of her husband's parents. By the time they were dead and she could look around, the days of plenty were over, even the old house was about to collapse, and a small fragment of the zamindari was all that left, and that too, more as a consolation for an injured ego, than as a substantial means of support.

But she had her fill of the legends about the exalted family into which she had been married.

Lingering at the last table in the row while she was being told how to cast her votes inside the screened cubicle, then sauntering towards the cubicle with halting steps, taking a pause every now and then, she was absorbed in a fantasy which she had herself conjured up and which made her swell with pride. She was not just an ordinary housewife in a village, she was almost a princess, the eldest daughter-in-law of an affluent and powerful zamindar, the action of an aristocratic family the lineage of which ran back to centuries. In her vision she saw their house standing in all its splendour, invested with all the power that she heard it once possessed, the power of which the strongest and the richest in the land had stood in awe, and to which all that it wanted was immediately surrendered without any murmur. In her imagination, she partook of all its power and glory. Her world was peopled with two classes, the masters and the servants, those who heard their praises being sung and those who sang the praises, who sat in the fields, raised crops, harvested them and carried

the harvest to the houses of the masters who lived on that produce but did nothing productive or useful and lived in luxury and comfort. Even the tall plinth of the house in which the masters lived was ten feet high over the open space in front of the entrance marked by steps made of chiselled stones.

She imagined herself to be standing at the entrance while Ganga Malik, the Chowkidar, stood below, with a napkin round his neck and stooping to touch her feet with hands folded in an attitude of deep humility. She could gaze upon her bare back that was meant to withstand the heat of the sun, the rain and the cold. He stood before her bare-footed, her feet having been built to plod through mud and water in the field in order to plant paddy for his master, and in the course of his service, even to tread on thorns or glowing coal if that was needed. In her imagination, he represented a class who existed only for her benefit and for the benefit of her class. She was experiencing an euphoria. She felt a warmth for Ranga's mother and Paluni's mother; not only had they stood by her side at her hour of drive need for which they had earned her gratitude, but in the strange mood she was in, she attached paramount importance to one's social class and she accepted them as members of the same upper class as herself.

As she proceeded towards the screened cubicle, she was reminded of how her ancestors, the feudal chieftains and nobles would proceed to participate in the ceremonial investiture of every new king and how every year, on an appointed day, in commemoration of the event, a mock rehearsal of the ceremony would be held. A similar ceremony was held also in the house of every chieftain to commemorate his own investiture. She knew that there was no more kings and chieftains in the country, but there was a government all the same, and government meant power and authority over other people which kings and chieftains had wielded before. The importance of what she was going to do was to assist in setting up such a government.

She felt exclusive in her status and in the realization of the importance of her mission, turned her face and looked proudly behind her into the room. What she saw left her speechless. A group of women had just then entered the room and had lined up at the far end of the row of tables. At its head, clad in a spotlessly white

sari fresh from the laundry was the washerman Budhia's mother. Next to her was her daughter-in-law, Budhia's wife. She was a city-bred young girl with elegant taste and she looked charming in her *sari*. It matched her beauty. Pemi's mother could also see Sodari's mother, a woman of the untouchable 'Hadi' caste who were employed at times by the villagers as scavengers. She was dressed in a brand new *sari*, printed all over with a design of red flowers in bouquets. Her *sari* had not even been washed and it still bore the manufacturing label. Sodari's mother had oiled and combed her thick black hair which she had neatly parted in the middle of her scalp and had tied into a ball. Her hair evidently had an excessive dose of oil, her head shone and a cost of oil that oozing out of her head covered her forehead.

'We want to cast our votes!' the woman cried.

'You will all be attended to!' the verifying officer said.

Pemi's mother was rooted to the spot as she looked at them. Her illusion of exclusiveness and superiority had been shattered. She was no more a member of the elite, the favoured, privileged ones, she was just anybody and everybody, equated even to a washer woman or a scavenger woman.

The bearded officer saw her standing near the cubicle and whispered something to another officer who then hurried to her and asked, 'What is it you want, madam?'

'Nothing', she said dryly.

'Please get in and cast your vote as you wish and come out soon so that another voter can go.'

He uttered the words clearly so that others would hear him.

She entered the cubicle. She saw six ballot boxes in a row, each bearing the name and the symbol of a particular candidate. She was illiterate, but she could locate the symbols printed on the two ballot papers. She was burning with hatred and she thirsted for revenge.

'Our people were not like this before,' she thought.

'They were meek and submissive, they knew their places. They never protested. Who were the people who changed their characters and made them arrogant and defiant? Who were the people who abolished the powers, privileges and prerogatives that the aristocracy enjoyed for generations? Those who did it did no good.'

She stamped the ballot papers with the seal given to her, folded the papers, then thrust them into the respective ballot boxes. She came out of the cubicle, returned the seal and the stamping pad to the officer and was then led to the exit. Before she went out of the room she saw Ranga's mother entering the cubicle.

The crowed outside had swelled, the noise was louder, more and more people could be seen coming from different villages and a helicopter was hovering over the scene, attracting attention and comments from the crowds. But Pemi's mother was feeling bored and tired. She walked a short distance where a mango tree provided shade over a wide patch of ground. She sat in the shade, enjoying a mild breeze. Under the tree lay heaps of mango blossoms and tender mango fruit hardly bigger than grains which had all dried up and turned black. Across the path leading to the village and a little ahead of her she could see the houses and gardens of people of the caste known as 'Padhan'. They did not belong to the aristocratic classes, they were hard-working cultivators who toiled on their own plots of land.

One could know at a glance that they were well-to-do people. Their houses had been strongly built and rested in repose under the shade of valuable fruit-trees. Near their houses were high hay-stacks, cattle-pens and wide pits in which cow-dung was dumped for composting. The houses were surrounded by luxuriant orchards and green farms where they grew vegetables for the market. Long bamboos with buckets attached to their bottoms could be seen being pulled into wells and raised with their loads for watering the vegetable gardens.

Pemi's mother sighed again and again as she looked at those houses with envy.

'God has given them enough!' she thought.

As she sat there, Ranga's mother and Paluni's mother arrived. Pemi's mother felt happy. She had the same feeling for them as she had inside the polling booth, a feeling of trust and intimacy because they belonged to her class and were, in fact, her own. Ranga's mother smiled happily and in a playful mood, asked, 'Do tell me, for which of the parties did you vote, elder sister?'

'Let me have one of your *pans* first, my dear,' Pemi's mother said 'My mouth has been missing a *pan* for ages!'

Ranga's mother untied a knot in the folds of an end of her sari tucked at her waist and handed over a special *pan* case to Pemi's mother.

'Help yourself to two *pans*, elder sister, or you may take even more,' she said.

Pemi's mother thrust two *pans* into her mouth, grunted with pleasure and said, 'You have saved me with your *pans*, my dear.'

Ranga's mother smiled: 'For whom did you vote, elder sister?' she asked again.

Pemi's mother told her, 'But that is strictly confidential!'

His work includes twenty-four novels, ten collections of short stories, three biographical works, two collections of essays, one book of poetry, five works on the tribal culture, a couple of plays and his incomplete autobiography. Gopinath Mohanty passed away in August 1991 after a brief illness.

Sitakant Mahapatra (born 1937) is a major voice in Indian poetry. A Doctorate in Social Anthropology he has been a Homi Bhabha Fellow (1975–77), a Senior Fellow at Cambridge University (1968–69) and a Ford Foundation Fellow at Harvard University (1987–88). Anthologies of his poems have been published in all Indian languages and seven European languages besides English. A recipient of several honours including Bharatiya Jnanpith, the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Orissa Sahitya Academy Award, the Kumaran Asan Poetry Award, the Sarala Award and the Soviet Land Nehru Award. He has translated into English and edited nine anthologies of the oral poetry of Indian tribes. He is President of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the World Decade for Cultural Development and Chairman of the Culture Sub-Commission of the Indian National Commission for UNESCO. He has edited two major Palm leaf manuscripts, namely, *Amarusatakam* and *Usavilas* and has several publications to his credit. He has also published a critical estimate of Sri Gopinath Mohanty's literary works entitled *Reaching the Other Shore.*

He now lives with his family at Delhi.

Cover Inset: 'Mountains', Jaya Appasamy
Courtesy: Lalit Kala Akademi